THROWN TOGETHER

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THROWN TOGETHER

A STORY

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'MISUNDERSTOOD' 'THWARTED' &c.

Florence Montgomery

TENTH THOUSAND

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PREFACE.

THE following Story, like its predecessor 'Misunderstood,' is not intended for children. Even less so since, in the course of the narrative, the Author is obliged, now and then, to side, as it were, with the children against the parents.

The Story, though not devoid of 'grown-up' characters, is mainly founded on the lives of children; and so appeals only to those who are interested in the subject.

May 1872.

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THROWN TOGETHER.

CHAPTER I.

THE HEROINE'S HOME.

FIVE O'CLOCK on a July afternoon in a London schoolroom, and the depressing sound of the scale of C.

Would not such a combination make the least frivolous rejoice that their education was completed?

Cecily Middleton, aged seven, is toiling up and down the piano, with hot heavy fingers, giving her wrist and arm a tremendous jerk every time it is her thumb's turn to go under; for which clumsy manœuvre she is every time pulled up by the governess at her side, and compelled to return to the bottom of the piano, and begin the ascent again.

Nina Middleton, some years her senior, is sitting at the table, limp and listless, by way of doing a rule-of-three sum. With her hair all pushed back from her hot face, and her chin resting on her hands, she is determining in her own mind that it is far too hot for any sum to come right; and she feels profoundly indifferent as to workmen and the rate of their wages,

which is the problem she has been given to consider. What *can* it matter? Whether the answer will be in money or in workmen she feels incapable of hazarding an opinion, and it seems to her so very unimportant.

'Nina, vous ne faites rien.'

Thus suddenly rebuked, Nina roused herself, and proceeded with a long-drawn sigh to multiply the first and second terms together, and to divide by the third, producing thereby a hideous confusion. Seeing her mistake, she, with another sigh of weariness and boredom, rubbed out what she had done, and began again; but the melancholy intonation of the scale of C, combined with the state of the atmosphere, seemed to render calculation impossible, and she found herself reducing pence to shillings, and allowing for forty-eight farthings in a pound. Growing desperate at last, with heat and incapacity, she rubbed out the whole sum—question and all; and then, in despair at what she had done, she drew her pencil down the slate with a terrific squeak, which brought upon her the wrath of Mademoiselle, and elicited shrieks of delight and amusement from Cecily.

Of course anything that created a momentary diversion from the scale of C was hailed as a relief by Cecily; and it took Mademoiselle some minutes, first to reprove Nina, and then to rise and reset the sum.

But this was no solitary instance of Cecily's power of deriving amusement from the trifling events of every-day life. The squeak of a pencil was quite sufficient, in lesson-time, to evoke her mirth; and any of the

hundred little accidents to which we are all more or less exposed in our daily path could send her into fits of laughter at any moment. If Mademoiselle knocked her funny-bone, or caught her gown in the fender, upset a cup of tea into her lap, or stumbled over a stool, Cecily was off, and there was no stopping her.

She enjoyed the few minutes of leisure at the piano to the full; and, after having recovered from the laughter produced by the squeak, she proceeded to swing her legs backwards and forwards to cool herself. In so doing, she made the startling discovery that by kicking the piano above the pedal, a vibration could be produced, and was immensely delighted. But, on attempting to bring the discovery to greater perfection by a somewhat more violent kick, Mademoiselle remonstrated from the table, and put an end at once to any further experiments. An attempt at 'hot-cross buns' with one finger met with a similar reception, and she was reduced to twisting round and round on the music-stool, till Mademoiselle once more returned to her side.

But opportunities for amusement were not quite over yet; for, as Mademoiselle reseated herself, she contrived to knock her finger against the notes, and raised that wounded member to her mouth with an exclamation of pain. Peal upon peal from Cecily—truly delighted was she! She rolled about on her seat till she nearly fell off the music-stool; and Mademoiselle, in an injured and somewhat huffy tone, desired her to resume her

practice; and soon laughter and amusement were lost in the intricacies of the scale of C.

Meanwhile Nina worked away at her sum, and finished it; put away her slate, and went to the open window, where she arrived just in time to see a hansom drive up to the door, and her father jump out of it.

This was rather an unusual event, and Nina felt puzzled to account for it. It was very seldom that he came home at this hour. He generally went straight to the park from his club, and she thought something particular must have brought him home, which opinion was confirmed by her hearing him call out to the footman at the door, in a tone of unwonted excitement, 'Has Mrs. Middleton come home from her drive?'

Nina felt very curious to know what could make him in such a hurry, and was just about to lean out of the window, in order to make herself still further mistress of what was going on below, when Cecily's music-lesson came to an end; and Mademoiselle, having betaken herself to her bed-room to prepare for tea, the emancipated captive came running to the window, exclaiming eagerly, 'Didn't I hear a hansom drive up?'

Nina instantly drew in her head, and came away from the window. Cecily's childish excitement over the hansom made her feel ashamed of her curiosity about it, and she answered, in an uninterested tone of voice, 'Yes, it was papa.'

Nina was a good deal older than her sister by years,

and many years older by disposition and temperament, for Cecily was childish and backward for her age. Moreover, Nina was a very proud child, and made the most of the years between them. Cecily was always so over-excited and over-interested in everything, that Nina often felt lowered in her own estimation by being interested in the things at all.

'Papa!' exclaimed Cecily; 'oh! perhaps he's come to take us out in the park. What fun! what fun!'

And, in spite of the state of the thermometer, Cecily capered about, and clapped her hands with delight.

These transports were childish, and Nina could not demean herself by joining in them. So she remarked carelessly that she didn't suppose he had; he might only have come to get a pocket-handkerchief, or perhaps to fetch his cards.

Presently Cecily said, 'Here comes mamma in the carriage, and papa is standing on the door-step, waiting to speak to her.'

Nina's curiosity overcame her pride, and she jumped up and joined her sister at the window.

The carriage drove up to the door. Colonel Middleton advanced eagerly, and the children heard him say, 'Lydia, it is all settled! Come into my room and read Magdalen's letter.'

'Oh, Nina, *did* you hear?' exclaimed Cecily; 'it was about Aunt Magdalen again. There's some secret about her, I am sure. This is the second or third time papa and mamma have talked about her to-day. What can it be?'

Nina answered indifferently that she did not know; but the expression in her eyes was not so uninterested as she would have her voice to sound. For her Aunt Magdalen, and her Aunt Magdalen's boy, Mervyn Lyndsay, were objects of deep interest to her; and she was inwardly quite as anxious as Cecily to discover what the news could be that seemed to have reference to them. She leaned out of the window still further, to see what was going on below; but there was little more to be seen. Colonel and Mrs. Middleton entered the house, the footman took books and parcels out of the carriage, the coachman drove round to the stables, and the two little girls were left wondering, each in her different way, what it could all mean.

Leaving them in their perplexity, let us descend to the hall-door; and, going back a few minutes, let us stand with Colonel Middleton on the door-step, while the carriage drives up to the door.

'Lydia, it is all settled! Come into my room and read Magdalen's letter.' So saying Colonel Middleton led the way to the smoking-room, and shut the door. 'I am so glad, I can't *tell* you,' he said, as he handed his wife the letter, and watched her while she read it. 'Magdalen deserves to be happy, if anyone does; and after all, in spite of her many years of widowhood, she is still quite a girl. I can't say how glad I am she has come to this conclusion.' He went on, walking up and down the room, every now and then glancing at his wife's face as she went on with the letter. 'I was still half afraid she would not make up her mind to the

step, in spite of my last letter. But it is that that has done it, of course.'

And Colonel Middleton continued his walk, in a high state of self-glorification and excitement.

'A very nice sensible letter,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'I am, indeed, delighted that she should have arrived at such a wise determination; I suppose one of her reasons for hesitating was Mervyn. But it would have been absurd to sacrifice herself for his sake. Besides he is getting such a big boy now that it will not make much difference to him, as he will be going to school.'

All this was said in a very decided tone.

'Of course, of course,' answered Colonel Middleton, in the easy way in which people make up their minds for others, and reconcile themselves to matters that do not concern them. 'He will . . . Who's there? Say not at home!'

This was spoken sharply, as some one tapped at the door; for Colonel Middleton was in great excitement over his news, and he wanted to talk it over with his wife. Therefore he greatly resented the interruption. It was too late, however; the door opened, and a gentleman was announced. Mrs. Middleton went out by another door, and Colonel Middleton advanced to greet the new arrival. He was much too full of his subject to talk long on any other, and at the first pause in the conversation he introduced it.

'My sister, Mrs. Lyndsay, is going to marry Lord Wardlaw.'

'I am delighted to hear it! I heard rumours of the

kind, but as I was told it was not settled, I did not like to congratulate you. Mrs. Lyndsay has only one child, I think?'

'Only one; a boy. It was on his account chiefly that she hesitated. Her husband died when the boy was a baby, and mother and son have lived so much alone, and been thrown so entirely on each other's companionship, that he has been treated more as a friend and equal than boys of his age generally are; and so I suppose she felt a second marriage was a little hard upon him. Indeed I doubt if she would have done it, had it not been that Mervyn is old enough to go to school. However, we have just heard from her that it is all settled, and the marriage will take place almost immediately. Wardlaw is a charming fellow, and he and Magdalen were great friends in old days; so it is quite a romantic story.'

'Ah! that is just what I was told; that there was some misunderstanding between them in their early days, otherwise they would have married years ago.'

'It hardly amounted to that. Wardlaw was then far too poor to think of marrying, and he had no prospects, as he had two elder brothers at that time. But I know what you are alluding to. They got him appointed to the Spanish Embassy, when they thought he was falling in love with Magdalen.'

'Who do you mean by "they?"'

'My father and old Lyndsay, afterwards Magdalen's husband. Wardlaw was in the diplomatic service, waiting for an appointment, and was meanwhile in

London, where he was constantly in Magdalen's society. Old Lyndsay was my father's dearest friend, and was also a great deal in the house. When he saw how matters were going on, he came to my father, and asked him if he wished his daughter to marry a pauper. My dear old father, who would never have noticed anything, however palpable, that was going on right under his eyes, took fright directly ; put himself at once into Lyndsay's hands, and begged him to help him out of the scrape. Acting upon his friend's advice, he immediately left town with my sister, on the plea of feeling ill himself and needing change of air.

'Meantime Lyndsay, who had interest just then with the Foreign Office, got Wardlaw this appointment, which he was too poor to refuse ; and he proceeded at once to Madrid.

'Shortly afterwards my father died, and my sister found herself alone and penniless, dependent on me, who had already a wife and several children. It was then that Lyndsay stepped forward and laid himself and his fortune at her feet. Hers is a very grateful nature, and she had received nothing but kindness all her life from her father's friend.

'During her father's short illness, too, Lyndsay had been her right hand. All unconscious of the wrong he had done her, she became his wife.'

'Did *you* know of it?'

'Believe me, no ; or I should not have allowed her to take such a step without at least opening her eyes.'

'Then how do you know it now?'

'I am coming to that presently. Let me tell my story my own way. Well! Lyndsay only lived eighteen months after his marriage.'

'Was she happy with him?'

'I believe she was happy enough, but she must have been very dull. To begin with, a man of fifty cannot be much of a companion for a girl of nineteen; and then they lived almost entirely at Glen-Mervyn, his wild out-of-the-way place in Wales. So I saw very little of them. They came to London to see a doctor for Lyndsay about eleven months after their marriage. That was the beginning of the illness that ended with his death.'

'I wonder why Wardlaw did not come back when he found she was free?'

'You must remember that nothing had passed between them, and that he had no reason to suppose she cared for him. Quite the contrary. For almost the first thing he heard of her after he arrived in Madrid, was the report of her intended marriage. Also he may have been too proud to marry her when she was a rich widow, or he may have resented her marriage, or a hundred things. Anyhow, as we know, he didn't; and it is only a year ago that, by the successive deaths of his father and brothers, he became Lord Wardlaw, with wealth sufficient to enable him to give up his diplomatic career, and to return to England.

'He and Magdalen met again this spring in London. I must own my wife and I secretly hoped that the old intimacy might be renewed, and that we might see her

rewarded for her long years of devotion to others. Imagine our disappointment when she left town at the end of June, and returned with her boy to Wales. Rumour, however, was not so silent on the subject as she; and we soon heard that she had refused Lord Wardlaw. Upon this I wrote to her, urging her to reconsider her determination. I urged her not to throw away such a chance of happiness, and my wife added her entreaties to mine.

'Magdalen answered both letters in her usual gentle way, thanking us most gratefully for our interest in her, but saying at the same time very decidedly that she had given the matter a great deal of consideration, and that the conclusion she had arrived at was final.

'As my sister's only relation, I sent for Lord Wardlaw, and spoke to him on the subject. In the course of our conversation we referred to the past, and somehow or other the truth oozed out; and I, for the first time, discovered that both had been victims of a plot between my father and old Lyndsay. Lord Wardlaw himself had only dimly suspected it till his return to England, and Mrs. Lyndsay, he said, had evidently no idea *who* had got him the appointment, nor why it was done. These are his own words. "At the time we were mutually hurt at each other's inexplicable conduct, and both felt we had been mistaken in supposing ourselves cared for. *She* judged by my accepting an appointment without telling her, or coming to wish her good-bye; and *I* judged by what Mr. Lyndsay told me, which was that she had begged her father to take her out of town,

as she was tired of London and its gaieties. I left England in a state of pique, and the announcement of her intended marriage fell under my eyes very shortly. It seemed to confirm my original impression, which was, that in spite of the disparity of years between them, it was Lyndsay she cared for, and not me at all. I believe I should have enlightened her as to all this; but I could not make up my mind to be the one to lower her son's father in her eyes. Besides, she might have resented it, and I might have done my own cause more harm than good. After all he was her husband afterwards; and probably in that relation he behaved himself so as to wipe out any early offences, and I should have been sorry to tarnish his memory."

'After this conversation I wrote again to my sister, laying the facts of the case plainly before her. I feared that, besides the difficulty about the step-father, she might be hampered by some foolish idea of being true to her husband's memory, or something of that sort; and I did not think it necessary she should be true to the memory of anyone who had used her so ill. Also I saw that in withholding from her the truth of the old misunderstanding, Lord Wardlaw was removing one of the strongest arguments in his own favour. I honoured him for his reticence, but was troubled with no such scruples myself.

'I told her exactly how it had all come about, feeling all the while what a powerful advocate I was, my sister's sense of justice being so strong. For the answer to this letter I cannot tell you how anxiously I waited. But

here it is, and a most satisfactory one; for though I cannot say it is exactly an *answer*—for my dear generous sister does not make the slightest or most distant allusion to her husband's conduct—yet she tells me decidedly she has accepted Lord Wardlaw, and that is all I care about.'

Colonel Middleton drew a long breath, and waited to receive his friend's renewed congratulations. The conversation then branched off to other subjects, and shortly afterwards his friend took his leave, and Colonel Middleton went up into the drawing-room to seek his wife.

He found her surrounded by five o'clock visitors, and saw there was not a chance of speaking to her; so, after talking over his sister's engagement with one or two ladies who knew her, he strolled out of the room, and bethought himself of what he would do next. This was his life. He was always wondering what he would do next.

Rowland Middleton was a man who 'hung about' all day. He had nothing to do. If he had had, he would not have done it. He was an easy-going indolent man, who left everything to other people, and found it answered very well. He lived on his wife's fortune, and had no employment of his own. He had sold out of the army on his marriage, and had ever since congratulated himself on having done with the trouble and worry of a constantly recurring occupation.

He was a kind good sort of man, not without a certain degree of cleverness, for he was agreeable and amusing

in society; but there it began and ended, for he never opened a book or cultivated his mind in any way. But he was fond of his wife, fond of his children, and had never done or said an unkind thing in his life.

Such was the man to whom Providence had assigned the care and responsibility of eight children—five sons and three daughters.

He had married young a woman older than himself, and perhaps his wife was a little too much for him. She was an only child and an heiress, and had always been accustomed to have her own way, and been spoilt and made much of. She had all the energy, all the strength of purpose, and all the fortune that he lacked. The place in Shropshire was hers, the house in London was hers, and she was capable of managing it all, and of managing him likewise. He left everything to her; it saved him trouble, and she liked it. This was particularly the case with the children. Mrs. Middleton was full of theories on the subject of education. Her children were suffering under the reaction that always follows an excess of any kind. The reaction from despotism is anarchy, and again from anarchy it will always be despotism, and so on for ever.

Mrs. Middleton, as a child, had been brought up on the new system of education—where children are, and know they are, the chief objects in the house; are always in their parents' society, and join as they please in every conversation. Mrs. Middleton, as a mother, had reverted to the system on which *her* parents had been educated, and brought up her children strictly,

assigning to them their school-rooms and their nurseries as their places of abode, and only admitting them to their parents' society at stated times. No child of Mrs. Middleton's ever strolled into the drawing-room at promiscuous hours. There was never any danger of the door opening slowly, and a small head protruding itself somewhere below the handle of the door, while the owner of the head delivered itself of some little remark invented as an excuse for getting into her society. But as Nina Middleton is the heroine of this story, we shall hear more of Mrs. Middleton's system and its results hereafter, and so need not animadvert upon it now, except in so far as it affected her husband, of whom we were speaking.

He had never been encouraged to break in upon his children's lesson hours, either by paying them visits in the school-room, or by taking them out walking with him.

By degrees he had ceased to expect much companionship in his children after their school-room life had fairly begun, especially since his three eldest boys had gone to school, and the school-room party consisted of the two little girls of whom this story has already spoken. It always seemed to him that it was too early or too late when he wanted to send for them. They had either *just* begun their lessons, or *just* sat down to their tea. So he contented himself with playing with the little ones in the nursery, and seeing the others at stated times, *i.e.* luncheon, and for a few minutes before dressing for dinner. That is, if he felt inclined. He

was not a man who would give up a pleasanter engagement for the sake of being with his children. And so it often happened that if he was out at luncheon, or late in dressing for dinner, he and his little girls did not meet all day. Sometimes—but this was very rarely—he would take them for a walk, and on the hope of this walk the sanguine Cecily lived from day to day.

Mrs. Middleton always had the school-room party down to luncheon. It was the exception she made to the rules of the old system. She considered it a good thing, lest the children should grow shy in their manners or awkward in their ways.

These London luncheons were a great penance to the little girls. Their shut-up school-room life made them shy and sensitive, and their parents' ways with them during that meal were not calculated to help them, diametrically opposed as those ways were. For their mother never lost an opportunity of finding fault with them, and pointing out their failings, no matter who was there; while Colonel Middleton's way of noticing them was by a kind of fatherly teasing, which, highly amusing to him, was a great, though unexpressed, terror to them, for they never knew what he was going to say next. It was often convenient to him to be 'funny' at their expense, but the wit which made him a favourite in society was a constant source of dread to his little daughters. Still they were very fond of him; indeed, there could be no doubt that if the question elder girls are so fond of putting to their youngers, 'Which do you like best, your papa or your mamma?' had been put to the little

Middletons, the answer would have been very decidedly in Colonel Middleton's favour.

He never scolded them, or interfered with them in any way; he left all that to his wife. As long as they were nicely dressed and looked pleased to see him, that was all he cared for. They were pretty little girls, and he was proud of them, and quite satisfied with them. He didn't bother his head about their characters, or listen much when his wife complained of Nina's being 'an odd child,' and Cecily 'very childish and backward.' Neither was he at all concerned when told that the governesses said Nina was proud and obstinate and Cecily lazy and inattentive. 'Children must be naughty sometimes,' he said, 'and it was quite right they should show it in the school-room, and keep their good behaviour for downstairs.'

Taking his wife's tone, he called Nina 'a queer customer,' but he himself seldom saw anything in her to justify his saying so. He noticed certainly that she often flushed angrily, and tossed her head at luncheon when her mother found fault with her, but this he rather admired; he thought it showed she had 'a spirit of her own,' and he liked it: it became her so well. He had an idea sometimes that she took things rather too strongly. He thought it a pity; he always took things so easy himself; but he supposed she would find out her mistake as life went on.

Nina was what is called 'an odd child.' She was silent and reserved, singularly undemonstrative, and rather obstinate and self-willed. The nurses called her

'haughty,' and the governesses called her 'cold.' Her mother never professed to understand her, and often expressed it as her opinion that she would grow up a very disagreeable woman. But her father, though he could not get her to chatter to him as Cecily did, did not discover all this in her, or think of her otherwise than as rather a character. He was proud of her beauty, pleased that he could discover in her face a strong likeness to his sister. Also she was his first daughter, the three eldest being boys. With Cecily, his younger girl, he was certainly more at his ease, but he had not the same pride in her. She was a winning little thing, very shy and timid; but when alone with him, away from her mother's dreaded eye, and relieved from the fear of his joking her in company, she would chatter to him as freely as possible. He teased her a great deal; he couldn't help it. She was just the sort of child to be teased, because she was always so affected by it. Her tears came so readily that her mother called her a cry-baby. This was a very sore point with poor little Cecily. Her father sometimes converted her name into 'Silly-ly,' or 'Silly-Billy,' and the fear that he would do so at luncheon before visitors kept the child in a constant state of anxiety during that meal.

When her school-boy brothers were at home, poor Cecily had a sad time of it. But it was her father's refined teasing that she dreaded most. If there was a goose at luncheon, she knew as well as possible that before the carving-knife was plunged into it, he would turn to her and say, 'Drop a tear for your brother.' Then

if, when she thought him too busily engaged in carving to notice her, she surreptitiously said 'Yes' to the servant when he brought her some, her father would be sure to look up and say, 'Eating your own brother, unnatural Silly-Billy!' If anyone could have known how the child dreaded Michaelmas Day!

'Why do you eat goose, then?' asked Nina contemptuously one day, when Cecily had been dismissed in tears from the dining-room, because, as her mother said, she couldn't take a joke; 'if you didn't eat it, there wouldn't be such a talk about it. It's every Michaelmas Day the same thing.'

'It's the apple sauce!' sobbed Cecily.

Sometimes the simple child would be caught unsuspectingly.

'Did I hear you singing this morning, Cecily?'

'Me singing? No, papa.'

'What was that noise, then, in the garden under my window?'

'Noise, papa? I didn't hear anything. Oh yes, the old donkey brayed, that was all.'

'Exactly; I thought it was one of your relations; I knew I could not mistake the family voice.'

As we began by saying, his little girls were very fond of him all the same, Cecily especially.

They were always glad when he did manage to call them at the right time, or take them out walking with him. The latter above all. It relieved the dullness of their school-room life, and was a great pleasure to them and, at this very moment, while he is debating

in his own mind what he will do next, they are both bolting their bread and butter as fast as they can, in the hope that he will take them out in the park.

They have been, as we know, on the *qui vive* ever since they heard his hansom drive up to the door, wondering what has brought him home. For like all children, Nina and Cecily Middleton were very much taken up with the affairs of their elders, and were always putting two and two together, after the fashion of those who are kept in the dark. Perhaps, from the state of repression in which they lived, they did it more than most children; but it is more generally done than parents have any idea of. And so it was, that from a few words dropped lately at luncheon, and other ways too insignificant to convey any idea except to already sharpened comprehensions, these two young creatures, who lived such a shut-up school-room life, that they were not supposed to know of anything that went on outside its walls, not only knew that there was a secret, but were perfectly aware that it concerned their Aunt Magdalen and their Cousin Mervyn.

To return to Colonel Middleton. With the strange contradiction which we often find in a character, this man, who never took the trouble to manage his own affairs, was very fond of managing other people's; and he had always turned his attention very much to those of his only sister, the Mrs. Lyndsay, whose intended second marriage was causing him such satisfaction. To begin with, his sister was a great deal younger than himself, so that he had always been accustomed to look

upon her as a child. And then she had been left a widow when she was so very young. Moreover, she had been left with an only son, heir to a large property; and anyone who heard Colonel Middleton descant on the sad position of a woman thus left without the help of a husband's advice, guidance, and control, would never have supposed that his own wife dispensed with all three, and got on very well without them. When his sister was in town he would bestow many of his idle hours upon her, sitting with her, discoursing on the management of property and the education of children —of both which subjects she knew him to be profoundly ignorant. But she did what was the kindest and wisest thing to do—listened patiently, and was grateful for his interest in her and in her boy, and went her own way, doing what her own right-mindedness and good sense told her was best; and he, misled by her gentleness and courtesy, would go away puffed up with the importance of having directed her for her good, and would be very long before he discovered that after all his advice had not been taken. He was always urging her to send her boy to school, even before the poor little fellow was out of petticoats; yet Mervyn Lyndsay was now a well-grown boy in jacket and trowsers; and it was only now and then that it flashed across Colonel Middleton that his nephew was still at home.

It was, however, not entirely for the sake of giving advice to his sister, that Colonel Middleton was so often to be found sitting in her drawing-room when she was in town. He was really fond of her, and there was

something about her house and surroundings that he did not find in his own. There was a sense of calm and repose about her which he could not define, and a charm in her society and conversation which always attracted him. Everything in her house went on smoothly; there were no jars. At home, though the children were kept so strict, and there were so many rules and regulations, there was always a noise and a bustle. The fact was, there was no repose about Mrs. Middleton. She was always scolding a servant or a tradesman, or a child. She never sat in one place long; was always bustling in and out of the room, or going up and down stairs; always writing notes, sending messages, or receiving parcels. Though she had nothing to do with the children's lessons, and only nominally presided over the household and kitchen, yet she always seemed too busy to speak to him.

Magdalen, though she taught her boy herself, superintended the household, and was in constant correspondence with steward, bailiff, &c., seemed always to have leisure to attend to him, and a clear head, and unfeigned interest in what he was saying.

Mrs. Middleton, as we have said before, never had a child in the room except at stated times. 'Occupation would be impossible if she did,' she said.

Colonel Middleton always found Magdalen with her little boy with her, either astride on her lap while she read to him, or if she was too busy to attend to him, driving a tandem of chairs by himself in the corner while she transacted her business.

Neither could he complain that the child was in the way; for if Mrs. Lyndsay fancied her brother wanted to speak to her alone, she always sent the boy away. And at her gentle word of dismissal, Mervyn always went up to the nursery without a murmur.

Colonel Middleton himself was always the first to object to such a measure; he was very fond of the boy. He was such a handsome merry little fellow, and so manly and independent; and yet he had such engaging manners, and such pretty caressing ways. There had always been something very attractive about the child ever since he was quite a baby. Colonel Middleton had often been puzzled to think why this child's demeanour was so different from that of his own children. Even the way he came into the room was so different from the shy bored manner in which his children presented themselves. This little fellow always came bounding in, so sure of a welcome, so certain that his appearance in the room was just as great a pleasure to others as it was to himself; so happy to come, so convinced that everyone was happy to see him. His was the fearless confidence of one who had never known anything but love all his life, and expected it from everything and everybody. Colonel Middleton liked to watch him at his games, too; to see how completely he was engrossed in his imaginary tandem or four-in-hand. It was so clear that to him the chairs *were* unmanageable refractory horses; that the stool on the top of the sofa *was* a high coach box; and that the ribbon he had taken off his mother's neck, and the bit of string tied to the paper-

knife did really form as good and as efficacious a pair of reins and a horse-whip as the best saddle-shop in London could produce! Perhaps they did; since things are not so much as they are, as as we see them. The leader was always frisky; and Colonel Middleton could not but envy the power of imagination with which children are gifted, when little Mervyn would say earnestly, looking at the inanimate motionless chair,

'He kicks *deffer'ly*, doesn't he? but you needn't be *fightened*, Uncle Rowley, 'cas I'll hold him.'

Mervyn got his share of teasing as well as his little cousins. Colonel Middleton was always teasing him about Wales, and the child was passionately fond of his home. He called him 'Taffy,' and would sing, directly he came into the room—

Taffy was a Welshman,
Taffy was a thief.

His own little Cecily would have swum away in her tears at once; but Mervyn, before he was four years old, had learnt to retaliate by calling him 'Uncle Roley-poley,' and would retort upon his rhymes by a vigorous

Rowley-poley, gammon and spinach,
Heigho, says Uncle Rowley.

Of course all this was some time before our story opens. As we said before, Mervyn was now a well-grown boy in jacket and trowsers; but the liking for the boy remained in Colonel Middleton, and he still was aware of the difference between him and his own

children, though he could not define what it was. At the same time, he never had thought, and did not now think, of comparing his wife's system of education with his sister's; he always felt so sure the former must be right. Besides, he was much too lazy ever to take matters into his own hands. 'To take things as they are, and make the best of them,' had ever been the practice of his life; and also he was well aware that what could be done with an only child could not be done in the case of a large family. He would have been the first to complain if the children came too forward, or were the least in the way. He liked their society when he felt inclined for it; but he by no means liked the trouble of children; and it happened constantly in the season that he was so busy amusing himself that two or three days would elapse without his coming to speech with his little school-room girls.

We left him just now, thinking what he would do next. It occurred to him, as he stood on the stairs debating, that his little daughters would have finished their lessons; and that as he had a stray hour, he might as well take them out as do anything else. So he ran upstairs, turned down the passage to the school-room, and gave a long low whistle. There was no answer at first, and he repeated it several times. Presently a door at the end of the passage opened, and a little voice said—

'Is that the Bully that keeps on whistling?'

'No, Silly-Billy, it's me. Come here!'

Cecily ran up to him, joyfully whispering, 'Take us out in the park, papa, *please* do.'

'What will mamma and Mademoiselle say?'

'Oh, Mademoiselle won't mind. She's got *migraine*, she says; or perhaps it's *coup-de-vent*, she thinks, as she's been rather sick.'

Colonel Middleton thought Mademoiselle must be clever to get *coup-de-vent* on so sultry a day, and also that sickness was not generally part of the complaint.

'Why, there's not a breath of wind anywhere,' he said.

'Cecily means *coup-de-soleil*,' said Nina, appearing at the door.

This was much more comprehensible; and Colonel Middleton sent a very civil message to Mademoiselle, to the effect that if she would like to lie down and rest, he would relieve her of her pupils, and take them out for a walk.

'But make yourselves very smart,' he said, as he left them; 'I can't walk with little Cinderellas.'

'Sundays, then, I suppose?' said Cecily.

'Sundays?' repeated Colonel Middleton, rather mystified.

'I mean frocks and hats,' she answered.

'Frocks and hats?' he questioned, still more bewildered; 'what *does* she mean, Nina?'

'She means are we to put on our Sunday things; our best things, you know,' explained Nina.

'Oh, I see! Yes, your best clothes, certainly; and come into the smoking-room when you are ready.'

They joined him in about ten minutes, looking as neat and pretty as any father could desire; and he got up and put on his hat.

CHAPTER II.

CHILDREN'S LIVES IN THE LONDON SEASON.

'WHERE shall we go?' he said, as he shut the hall-door.

'Oh! the park, papa,—*please*,'—said Cecily.

'What makes you so fond of the park?'

'Oh! it's such fun, papa. I like seeing all the people riding, and passing the people who you know, and seeing you take off your hat, or hold up your umbrella.'

'Hold up my umbrella?'

'Yes. When you see a lady, you always take your hat off; but when you see a gentleman that you know, you hold up your umbrella; at least, if he's riding you do. If he's walking you hold up two fingers, and say, "How *are* you?" Nina and I always call them papa's "how-*are*-yous." We meet them sometimes in the streets or squares when we're walking with Mademoiselle, and then we always say to each other, "How *are* you?" Don't we, Nina?'

But Nina was looking at a perambulator in the distance, and didn't answer. Cecily, not at all discomfited, went chattering on.

'Mademoiselle always takes us into Berkeley Square

or Kensington Gardens, where there are no "How-*are*-yous," or anything to look at. It's very dull.'

'But don't you play games in the square? I remember thinking games in Berkeley Square very good fun when I was a child.'

'Ah! but then you were a boy, and we're girls, you see. We mayn't play with boys, and the games in Berkeley Square are for boys and girls. It's a great bore not being able to play with boys; I like them much better than girls. I wish you would ask mamma to let us, papa. Will you?'

Colonel Middleton felt he was getting himself into a mess, and, to gain time for reflection, he said: 'So you never play with boys?'

'No, hardly ever. There's only one boy we may play with, and he's gone now.'

'Who's that?' asked Colonel Middleton.

'Oh, that's Mervyn,' said Cecily.

At this moment Nina, who had been lingering behind, kissing her hand to the perambulator she had been watching, came running up.

'What were you looking at?' asked her father.

Nina pointed to a perambulator which was crossing the road, in which he recognised his two youngest children.

'Going home to bed I suppose,' he said, turning round and shaking his stick at them. The nurses were seen making frantic attempts to induce the children to see and return their father's salutation; but the little occupants of the perambulator looked in

every direction but the right one. The eldest kissed his hand in the direction of the sky, and the other maintained a stolid indifference to everything and everybody.

'So you play with Mervyn?' resumed Colonel Middleton, as they walked on; and he was silent for some time after, his thoughts wandering off to Mervyn. He wondered how the boy would take the news of his mother's intended marriage. 'Do children in general object to step-fathers and step-mothers?' he asked himself. 'Why should they object to the former?' He thought perhaps his little girls might be able to throw some light upon the subject; and never for a moment dreaming that they would be able to follow the course of his thoughts, he asked abruptly: 'How should you feel if anyone were to tell you you were going to have a papa?'

Nina saw the drift of the question in a moment, and flushed indignant scarlet up to the eyes. The more simple Cecily was quite innocent of his meaning, and answered directly: 'Going to have a papa! Why, we've got one.'

'Ah! to be sure, so you have, I forgot,' said Colonel Middleton, rather puzzled at seeing the case was not quite analogous. 'But I mean, supposing you were told you were going to have a new one?'

'Two papas!' exclaimed Cecily; 'why, we couldn't have two, could we?'

'No, no, I don't quite mean that. Supposing you'd never had one——No, bother, how is it? Supposing

you had had one and he was dead, how should you feel if you were told you were going to have another ?'

'I should be crying so about the dead one, that I shouldn't be able to see the new one,' said the tender-hearted Cecily, looking very much as if she were going to begin at once.

Colonel Middleton got a little afraid of a scene in the street. He took her hand, and tried to laugh her out of it. 'How *can* I put it ?' he mentally questioned. 'Look here,' he said: 'supposing you couldn't remember your own papa, how should you feel if you were told you were going to have another ?'

'Why, that would be like Mervyn,' answered Cecily; 'he can't remember his papa.'

'Exactly,' said Colonel Middleton eagerly: 'well, how would Mervyn feel ?'

But before Cecily could answer, Nina burst in: 'How would he feel ? angry, miserable ! He would never look at him, or speak to him; no more would I, if I were Mervyn !'

'Whew !' whistled Colonel Middleton. This was altogether a bad look-out. He walked on silently for some time, feeling, as he had once or twice felt before, when in conversation with his eldest daughter, that she was a little too much for him.

This easy-going man had occasionally been made rather uncomfortable by a look in her eyes, and by the sense that she altogether took things much more strongly than he did. He wondered now why she had suddenly got so hot about his question, and glanced

curiously now and then, as they walked on, at the handsome little face by his side, still flushed with the eagerness with which she had spoken. He turned to the more shallow Cecily, and changed the conversation.

While they two chatted away, Nina walked along in a perfect storm of indignation. She had of course, in her usual way, put two and two together, and saw how it all was as clearly as possible. Sympathy for Mervyn and hatred to the imaginary step-father were the two prominent feelings in her heart. She was very fond of her cousin, and had a great admiration for his character, differing though it did so entirely from her own. Perhaps that was why she admired it. Their natures were diametrically opposed, their way of life utterly different; and yet these two children had a fascination the one for the other; so that though Nina could little understand his open unreserve, his demonstrative ways with his mother, and his entire freedom from the sensitive pride by which she was herself eaten up, yet she could sympathize very strongly with him. As she thought of the way in which his life was bound up in his mother's, of the way in which he watched over and attended to her, and seemed always to prefer her society to any other—how they sat together, walked together, rode together—and then pictured to herself an old ogre of a step-father coming in between them and marring it all, she stamped her foot upon the ground, and grew hot all over in her sympathetic indignation. He would interfere with Mervyn; he would perhaps keep him all day in a schoolroom as she herself was kept, shut out altogether from

his mother's society; he would even perhaps separate him entirely from her, and send him to school.

The crack of the little heel upon the pavement would almost have been audible to her father's ears had he not at that moment been stopped by a passing 'How *are* you?'

Colonel Middleton drew his friend on one side, so that the children should not overhear the conversation; but Nina was quite able to understand that her father was being congratulated on her aunt's marriage; and as the friend moved on, she caught the words, 'Wardlaw *is* such a charming fellow.'

'Wardlaw!' she muttered to herself; 'such a name, too! I'll never call him Uncle Wardlaw, that I am quite determined!'

Colonel Middleton and his little girls were now standing opposite Stanhope Gate, waiting for an opportunity to cross over into the park.

As they stood there, an omnibus passed, loaded inside and out with passengers. Little Cecily's eyes wandered all over it, amused to see how covered it was with human beings. Colonel Middleton was just going to tell her not to stare up at the omnibus, when, to his horror, he saw her face light up with excitement and recognition. She smiled and nodded repeatedly, and a man, sitting on the top of the omnibus, made her a hesitating but very respectful bow.

'Cecily,' he exclaimed angrily, 'what on earth are you about?'

'Didn't you see him, papa?' she answered, still so

excited at the occurrence that she did not notice her father's tone; 'and how smart he was! I never saw him so smart before. I think he must have been at the Crystal Palace. I suppose it was because he was so smart that you didn't know him again?'

'What are you talking about?' said Colonel Middleton, not at all mollified by this explanation. 'How should I or you know a low fellow on the top of an omnibus?'

'Papa!' she exclaimed reproachfully, 'it was the clock-man!'

At this moment the policeman made a sign that the road was clear, and they were obliged to cross, so that Cecily's lecture was postponed for a time; but as soon as they got into the park, he said gravely, 'Now remember, Cecily, never on any consideration nod to anyone on the top of an omnibus. Young ladies do not do these kind of things. Your mamma would be horrified if she heard of it. Do you hear me?'

'But, papa,' persisted Cecily, 'he was our *own* clock-man, who winds up the school-room clock *every* Saturday; and as it's a half holiday, and Mademoiselle in her room, I always have a nice little talk with him, and he *is* so kind and amusing. So how could I not nod to him when I see him in the streets?'

All this was said in a most plaintive voice, and she looked up to her father imploringly, adding, 'He is the *nicest* clock-man, and he *does* make the school-room clock go so well.'

When she first began to speak, Colonel Middleton

had been making up his mind not to see a lady who was approaching, whom he remembered once meeting at a croquet party in his own neighbourhood in the country, and who he saw was trying to bow to him; but the look in Cecily's innocent eyes as she asked him how she *could* ignore her school-room friend when she met him in the street, made him feel rather ashamed of his intention. He felt rebuked by the child's wondering gaze, and made the lady in question a very cordial bow as she passed. Lucky for him that he did so, for the moment she was gone Cecily recognised her with all the astonishment and excitement which children feel at seeing a country friend in London. They always seem to think it so extraordinary that anyone whom they are accustomed to see only among fields and hedges should be walking in the park like any other person.

'Why, that is the lady that stays sometimes with Mrs. Stapleton! Oh, papa! what a pity you didn't stop and speak to her! Why *didn't* you stop?'

'My dear, I don't know that I had anything to say to her.'

'Oh! I could have thought of such lots of things. You might have asked after Mrs. Stapleton's silver pheasant, and the guinea-pigs, and so much besides. *May* I run after her and call her back to speak to you?'

But somehow Colonel Middleton did not feel that lively interest in his neighbour's belongings that Cecily seemed to take it for granted he should, and he positively refused to allow any advances of the kind to be

made. The lady, he said, was enjoying her walk, and he insisted that she should be allowed to pursue her way unmolested.

Directly after they came to another stop. A tall fair man hailed Colonel Middleton with an appearance of great pleasure, which feeling seemed reciprocated. Cecily saw they were likely to talk some time, so she strayed a little from the group, and leant against the railing, in imitation of some gentlemen she saw doing so, to their great amusement; but Nina, attracted by something in the new comer's face, stood watching him as he conversed with her father. He laughed very often, and it was such a ringing, pleasant laugh, that she caught herself once or twice laughing too; it sounded so very cheery. She felt quite glad when she heard her father ask him to luncheon the next day, and hoped they would continue talking some time, so much did she like watching the pleasant face.

Presently she caught his eye, and he came forward smiling kindly, and shook hands with her, saying, 'This is one of your little girls, I am sure,' and asked her her name. She fancied he looked a little disappointed at her answer, but he said nothing, and resumed his conversation with her father.

He seemed very amusing, for Colonel Middleton laughed almost as much as he. As he talked, Nina could not help noticing how often he glanced at her, and always with an expression of interest. At last he said good-bye, shaking hands cordially with Colonel Middleton, and taking off his hat with a smile to Nina,

which pleased her very much, though it made her feel rather shy.

'Come along,' said her father. 'Where's Cecily?'

Cecily was engaged in trying to copy the attitude of one of the gentlemen she had been watching. She was standing with her back to the railings, and trying to get her elbows on the top, that she might support herself by them, as he was doing. But being many inches too short, the experiment proved a failure, and being called to order by Colonel Middleton, she gave it up, and joined him and her sister.

Nina longed to know who the stranger was, but for that very reason could not make up her mind to ask.

Cecily saved her the trouble.

'Papa,' she said, 'Who is that gentleman?'

'Well, dear,' he answered, in as indifferent a manner as he could assume, 'I don't know that you will be much the wiser if I tell you. His name is Lord Wardlaw.'

Nina took a step backward, in her astonishment.

'*That* Lord Wardlaw!' she mentally said. '*That* Mervyn's step-father!'

Her feelings with regard to her aunt's marriage underwent a sudden change. The interfering old ogre disappeared, and she began to think she did not pity Mervyn so very much after all.

'I shall call *him* Uncle Wardlaw,' she settled in her own mind.

'We must be going home,' said Colonel Middleton, looking at his watch.

'Home?' said Cecily regretfully, 'back to the dull old school-room, away from the four-in-hands, and all the fun. Oh dear! what a pity!'

'Well, I am going to do a little shopping first,' said her father, 'so I shall not go home straight, and perhaps I'll take you back in a hansom.'

This made up for everything. Cecily's idea of the height of bliss began and ended in a hansom, and she became as eager to leave the park as she had been to come into it. They turned out at Albert Gate.

'What sort of shop, papa?' she said eagerly.

'That one,' he said, pointing to the flower-shop opposite. 'I want to get a flower for my coat.'

'Oh dear, that's rather dull!' said Cecily, in a disappointed tone, for her mind had been running on strawberries and cream. 'Gunter's is close by, papa!' she added, wistfully.

'Too late for ices to-night,' he answered, as he opened the shop-door; 'but another time, perhaps.'

Cecily was quite satisfied, but Nina knew well enough what her father's promises were worth. Perhaps her penetration had long ago discovered how completely life was with him the fancy of the moment; and she knew it was very likely he would not even remember to take them another walk all the season.

'Choose me a flower, children,' he said, turning to them. Cecily immediately produced an enormous peony, to the great amusement of the shopman, and somewhat to the annoyance of Colonel Middleton, who

did not like being made, even in the slightest way, to look ridiculous.

'Ah! that is something like,' he said, taking the spotless yellow rose-bud which his eldest daughter silently handed him.

They called a hansom outside, and Cecily jumped in with great delight. She sat bodkin, so she had a capital view of everything all down Piccadilly, and indulged in little bows to the passers-by every now and then, unknown to her father, who was not looking her way.

She threw open the doors with a great clatter when they stopped, and tried to jump out on to the pavement, as she had so often admiringly watched her father do from the school-room window.

But her legs not being long enough for the operation, she fell short of the kerbstone, and splashed into a puddle lately deposited by a friendly water-cart.

'Really, Cecily, you are too clumsy for anything,' said her father; 'look at your boots!'

Cecily looked in dismay, and made the best of her way upstairs, in great fear of meeting her mother.

Nina went up to her father and wished him good-night.

'What! shan't I see you again?'

'No, papa, there is a dinner-party to-night.'

'Good gracious! so there is. I quite forgot. I'm afraid I shall be late;' and hastily kissing her, he ran off to his dressing-room.

Nina went up to the school-room, and found it was past half-past seven.

Mademoiselle informed her that her mother had been to the school-room to wish them good-night, not knowing they were out with their father; and that she had left a message to say that she was sorry to miss them, and that she 'hoped they would work hard at their lessons to-morrow after such a treat as a walk in the park.'

Nina received the information and the message with a sort of haughty indifference, and went upstairs to take off her things. Cecily was in full talk.

'Nina, there's such lots of people coming to dinner to-night; do let's come to the school-room window, and see them arrive.'

This was a favourite pastime generally with both; but to-night Nina's head was full of her boy cousin, and she did not feel much interest in it.

'Oh, Nina, we'll go to the top of the stairs, and see them all go down to dinner. I've found a better place than ever to see from, where there's plenty of room for two.'

When they returned to the school-room it was only a quarter to eight, and therefore too soon for any arrivals. Nina instantly took a book, and sat down upon the floor with it.

Cecily, who had already stationed herself at the window, was in despair.

'Oh! Nina, *don't* read. I know if you once begin, you'll never leave off to look at the people.'

'Yes, I did,' said Nina absently; for she was already

deep in her book, and hardly heard what her sister was saying. 'I can, I mean I should—I shall.'

'Oh! you're not attending a bit,' said Cecily, despairingly; 'you're thinking about that stupid book, and here comes the first carriage and everything. I wish there were no books in the world, *that* I do! . . . . Yes! it's stopping . . . . it's stopped at the door . . . yes! and they've let down the steps, and out comes such a smart lady; lots of diamonds! . . . Now her husband is telling the footman what time the carriage is to come, and then he goes into the house. No! his wife turns round, and tells him she's forgotten something. I wonder if it's her gloves, or her fan, or what. Perhaps it's a present for mamma. Such a hunt they're having in the carriage, but they can't find it. Ah! now the footman has picked it up on the step. Oh! it's only her pocket-handkerchief; how dull! Now they've both gone in. Oh! here comes another carriage. Nina, *do* come!' But all these remarks were lost upon Nina, who was now buried in her book.

Mademoiselle, taking pity on the eager Cecily, and moreover, a little excited herself, joined her at the window, and entered with spirit into the entertainment.

Cecily's flow of chatter went on increasing in excitement as more guests arrived, reaching Nina faintly in little shrieks (for Cecily's head was half out of window), mingled with Mademoiselle's occasional remarks—'Ah! quelle belle toilette! Mais vraiment! Combien c'est comme il faut! Regardez donc! que cette dame est bien mise! Quelle charmante coiffure!'

'A hansom! A hansom! and a "How-*are*-you" in it,' exclaimed Cecily, drawing in her head. 'Nina, I do believe it's the same we met in the park!'

Down went Nina's book, and she was at her sister's side in a moment. She was only just in time to see a tall man pay his cab, and run up the steps. But she was disappointed, for it was not Lord Wardlaw, or anyone the least like him.

'How could you say it was one we saw in the park, Cecily! He was tall and fair, and this man has got nasty dark hair, quite black and oily. Phaugh!' And Nina made a gesture of disgust.

Cecily took it up rather warmly. 'Dark hair isn't nasty a bit, and I'm sure he's a very nice man. He spoke so kindly to the cabman when he stopped next door by mistake, and didn't holloa and shout at him like some people would, and call him a fool.'

'Cécile, Cécile,' said Mademoiselle reprovingly, catching only the last word, 'taisez-vous donc!'

Thus rebuked, Cecily turned again to the window, muttering as she did so, 'Besides, the fair man isn't the only "How-*are*-you" in the world.'

But to Nina just now he was, for her thoughts were full of Mervyn, and she wanted to know more of the man who was to bring such a change into his life. So she made no objection when Cecily presently suggested that it was time they should go and establish themselves on the staircase, for she wanted to satisfy herself whether Lord Wardlaw was of the party or not.

Mademoiselle agreed to the plan on condition that they

would promise not to make a noise, or let themselves be seen, and also that they would return very soon, as it was time for Cecily to go to bed. She herself remained behind to have her supper. Her head, she said, was still bad, and it was probable she should retire early. The two little girls wished her good-night, and ran down-stairs, settling themselves in a corner where they could see without being seen.

The drawing-room doors were open, and they could hear a faint buzz of conversation every now and then rise and die away almost directly, to begin again in another part of the room, with the same melancholy result. Their mother's clear decided tones rose above the rest every now and then, as if she were making an effort to suggest topics which might furnish some sort of spasmodic conversation to cheer the gloomy interval between the arrival of the guests and the announcement of dinner. At last the butler came up the stairs, and went into the drawing-room.

There was a moment's greater silence than ever, and then, with a rush and a roar, conversation sprang up. Then came the rustling of gowns and the tramp of many feet, the sound of many voices, and mingled laughter, getting nearer and nearer to the children as the party streamed out on the landing and passed down the stairs.

It seemed as if each man had for many weeks kept pent up within him a certain conversation he wished to hold with the particular lady who was consigned to him to take down to dinner, and that now, at last, the opportunity had come.

Nina and Cecily felt quite deafened by the torrent of words which swept past them. 'What chatter-boxes!' muttered Cecily, but she was called to order by a frown from her elder sister.

First came their father, good-looking, cheerful, and witty, evoking light rippling laughter from the pretty woman on his arm, while his attention was divided between her and Nina's yellow rose-bud, which he was re-arranging in his button-hole. Then, two and two, came the guests, strangers to the children mostly, though they sometimes recognised faces they knew in open carriages and an occasional 'How-*are*-you;' but Nina looked in vain for Lord Wardlaw. Last of all, on the arm of some foreign prince—erect, well-dressed, and self-dependent—came the children's mother.

Clear and loud were her tones as she discoursed with him in his own language, every word of which was intelligible to her eldest daughter. Any close observer would have seen Nina shrink into herself a little as her mother swept out upon the landing, as if there were something in that mother's appearance and manner which jarred a little upon the child's sensitive organisation. Nay, more, as if her very presence excited some curious feeling within her; for her cheeks flushed a little, and her eyes fell, while into the corners of the tightly compressed little mouth crept an expression which was not fear, nor dislike, nor contempt, but which partook a little of all three, and was gone before one could be certain it had been there at all, changing into keen interest and excitement as

her mother's words reached her: 'So you knew Lord Wardlaw abroad, and think my sister-in-law a very lucky person? So do I. . . . Yes, there is a boy; but, of course, he will go to school, and . . .' Here the decided tones died away in the distance, and were lost in the hum of voices which now proceeded from the dining-room.

Had Nina followed the company downstairs, she would have heard plenty about Lord Wardlaw; for during the first two courses he and his marriage, and his previous history, formed the chief subjects of conversation. There was but one opinion as to himself. He was *charming*. The verdict was unanimous. Opinions as to whether Lord Wardlaw or Mrs. Lyndsay were the 'lucky one' were a little divided. Some thought the luck on his side, in possessing such a pretty, charming wife as Colonel Middleton's sister. Others, sitting a good way from Colonel Middleton, thought it on hers. A young man like Lord Wardlaw, with a fair fortune: who might have married any of the pretty London girls of the day, had he been so disposed. Others aside, to each other, thought a rich widow a great windfall. Others again, still aside, thought the boy a terrible stumbling-block. Some rejoiced at the constancy of affection displayed by Lord Wardlaw. 'That sort of thing is so rare in these days.' Colonel Middleton told the whole story of the early friendship from his end of the table, while his wife told it from hers. By degrees, the conversation branched off to other subjects, with which we have nothing to do. So

now, while the champagne goes round, and the clatter of voices and laughter sounds up the staircase, let us return to the school-room, and follow the young lives there.

It is nearly nine o'clock, and Cecily has gone to bed. Mademoiselle, still suffering from her headache, has also retired, and in the rapidly-darkening school-room Nina sits alone. She has been reading by the fading light, and the book is still open in her hand; but now she is leaning against the window-sill, looking out into the street. It is an oppressive night, and both the windows are wide open. Not much to be seen of interest there: an organ below is playing a popular air, but otherwise the street is almost deserted, for the roll of dinner-carriages is over, and that of the later entertainments not yet begun. Truly the only thing of interest is the handsome little face itself.

The face is a curious mixture: the soft dreamy eyes contrast so sharply with the firm, I had almost said hard, little mouth. A varying face, for its earnest, thoughtful expression now is as different as possible from that which stole over it on the staircase not half-an-hour ago.

Sad that the sight of a mother should have the power to call up such an expression. But alas! it was not a solitary instance. It seemed, indeed, as if there were something antagonistic in the dispositions of mother and daughter; so utterly different was their organisation, that it appeared hopeless that they should ever understand one another. Mutual love and for-

bearance would have done it. Patience on the one side and reverence on the other might have drawn them together; but unhappily these feelings were unknown to either mother or daughter.

No doubt Nina was not easy to understand, nor was she a winning or attractive child. No, she was, as her mother said, 'an odd child;' one of those children who incur the opprobrium 'difficult'—God help them! for few others will. Cold, proud, indifferent.

Let us watch her a little before we join in the verdict ourselves.

The July evening is coming to a close. The organ has strayed farther away. Every now and then snatches of chorus sound from Park Lane, as the merry little street-boys return from bathing in the Serpentine. Everything speaks of the end of the busy day, and Nina rouses herself from her reverie, and looks at the school-room clock.

It is past nine, and she puts away her book, and prepares to leave the room. But first she stoops down and takes off her shoes. Then, very quietly, almost stealthily, the child opens the school-room door, and passes along the passage, and up the stairs.

Her bed-room door is open, and Cecily's voice is heard from within, singing little songs to herself, to beguile the time while she is waiting for her sister. But Nina brushes past, and turns down a passage which corresponds with the school-room one below. Where can the child be going?

Here a door stands partly open, and Nina hesitates

a moment before she passes it. Voices and laughter from within, and the clatter of plates and dishes, intimate that the nurses are at supper, and very quietly she creeps past, as if afraid of being discovered. Very, very quietly, and enters with a noiseless step a darkened room a little farther on.

A night-light burns dimly on the table, and Nina stands by the door till her eyes get sufficiently accustomed to the subdued light to be able to distinguish the different objects in the room.

A big bed, a small bed, and two cribs, proclaim the bed-room nursery. The big bed is empty, but three sleeping children occupy the others.

In a little bed by itself lies a big rosy boy about five, and in the crib next the wall a rosy baby girl.

Without glancing at these two, Nina passes on to the crib on the other side of the big bed, and stands at its foot, motionless. A restless sleeper this. The bed-clothes are tossed about in every direction, the little face on the pillow is flushed, and the long fair hair all in disorder. He cannot have been asleep long, nor does he seem to sleep soundly now, for disjointed words proceed from his lips, and he stirs uneasily. He must, judging by the profusion of hair, and general aspect of the lovely little face, be at least three years old; but his face and hands are scarcely as large as those of the baby-sister who sleeps so soundly in the crib opposite. The little hand and arm that lie outside the coverlet are thin and small, and sadly blue are the veins in the transparent forehead.

And now let us take one glance at the face of the child who is cold, hard, indifferent.

Where is the look of haughty indifference with which it received her mother's message? Where is the look of supercilious contempt with which it watched that mother on the stairs? Where is even the firm tightly-compressed little mouth?

Gone! all gone!—all merged in an expression of yearning tenderness, of passionate affection, which pervades and beautifies the entire countenance.

The child's whole soul is in her face as she gazes at her little invalid brother. Gazes, gazes, as if she could never gaze enough.

Going to his side at last, she bends over him, and tries to arrange the rumpled bed-clothes, and to relieve the hot forehead of the tangled, disordered hair. Bending closer still, she impresses tender kisses on his pillow, on the sheet, on his hair; and, as she does it, she whispers softly, 'Good night, Totty, good night!'

Then returning to the foot of the crib, she stands there for a few minutes, as if to assure herself his sleep is sound. It seemed as though she fears it is so light a slumber that he may waken at any moment and find the nurses not yet come to bed, for she appears loth to leave him.

Is she going to keep a lonely vigil till that time shall come? for she twines her arms around the bars of his crib, and lays her head upon them.

No; she is only repeating to herself, ere she leaves him in the darkness, the old rhyme, slightly varied, with

which many a nervous child has soothed itself to sleep amid the fancied terrors of a lonely room.

> Four corners to his bed,
> Four angels round his head,
> One to watch, two to pray,
> And one to keep all fears away.

The regular breathing of the other children is heard in the stillness as she stands there watching, and the sound seems to irritate her a little, as if their health and strength contrasted painfully in her mind with the frail little sleeper before her.

But Totty does not stir again, and she is satisfied.

Her dark eyes seem to glow with the intensity of the love within her, as she takes a farewell gaze, and without one glance at the other beds she retires as noiselessly as she came; turning once more ere she passes into the lighted passage, to kiss her hand to the little sleeper, and to murmur softly, 'Good-night, Totty, good-night!' Then quickly and hastily she goes down the stairs, and regains her own room.

Night after night, unknown to all, suspected by none, does the child pay this noiseless visit. Night after night does the little figure steal up the staircase, shoes in hand, and disappear in the darkened room. She is always more or less in fear of detection, but never yet has she been discovered.

Mademoiselle always supposes her in her bed-room, Cecily supposes her with Mademoiselle; housemaids and nurses are alike busy at their supper; and so hitherto she has escaped.

It may be that He unto whom all hearts are open, and whose pity is equal to His power, ordered that it should be so, and gave His angels charge concerning her, to keep all hindrances away.

It may be that He was leading the wayward child to Himself, through her love for her baby brother; lest in the lovelessness of the atmosphere in which she lived, the little heart should really come to be as cold and hard as it was there considered, and so should never rise into the experience of that higher love which is in itself both God and heaven.

'For it is through the gush of our human tenderness that the soul first learns its destiny is divine; it is through a mortal yearning, unsatisfied, that the soul ascends, seeking a higher object; it is through our human affections that the immortal and the infinite in us reveals itself.'

The voices of the ladies returning to the drawing-room came up the stairs half an hour after, and roused Nina from her dreamless sleep. She woke with a beating heart, for she was startled and confused, and she dreamily fancied Totty must be ill, and that the voices she heard were those of the alarmed nurses. By degrees she remembered what it all meant, and with a sigh of relief she lay down again. But the moment's fear had unsettled her, and she could not get to sleep.

She lay, wondering whether the voices had disturbed Totty too; and if so, whether he would find the nurses come to bed or not. Vague fears haunted her of his lying awake frightened, and not able to make himself

heard. She could not calm herself about it, except by repeating the soothing rhymes over and over again; and sleep overtook her, dreamily murmuring—

Four corners to his bed,
Four angels round his head,
One to watch, two to pray,
And one to keep all fears away.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. MIDDLETON'S RULES AND REGULATIONS.

MRS. MIDDLETON was, as we have said, a woman of theory, and her theories on the subject of the education and training of children were very decided. *Her* system, as she imagined, combined the advantages of the old system and the advantages of the new.

'Children now-a-days,' said Mrs. Middleton, 'were too much made of, took too prominent a part in the household economy, and were taught to think themselves of too great importance.' They came too forward altogether, and were too much with their parents, to the exclusion, on the one hand, of many topics of conversation; or to the hearing a great deal that was not intended for their ears, on the other. The nursery and the school-room were the proper places for them, regular walks with their nurses or governesses quite change enough, and she insisted on early hours for rising and going to bed.

Prompt obedience to herself she exacted; quick, unanswering submission to every order. All very well in its way. But the fault in Mrs. Middleton's system was, that there was *no* confidence or love between

her and her children—*no* interchange of thought and affection.

She did not see enough of them to understand them; she not watch or study them at all; so that she failed to discover where her system fell short; or, indeed, that a system which succeeded with one child might possibly fail with another; that all children are not alike; and that where characters and temperaments differ, methods of training should differ also, or at least be modified and adapted.

Strong in the knowledge that her system had had great success with her three elder boys, she was firm in her own confident opinion that her theories were perfect, and her practice more perfect still.

It so happened, that with her three easy-going, thick-skinned boys, it *had* all answered very well; but she failed to see that she had in her little daughters totally different characters to deal with.

Nina was a child who could have been led through her affections, had those affections been drawn out; but this 'driving' system only stirred up her pride and self-will. Sensitive to the last degree, she had learnt to be ashamed of the deep feelings within her, and to call up pride to help her to overcome and conceal them: and that pride had now become so completely a second nature, that she daily acted an indifference to everything and everybody that she did not really feel.

Cecily, timid and nervous, was a child who needed protection and help, and who should have been encouraged to overcome her self-consciousness and fear of

ridicule; and have been taught that she could depend upon her mother's love and assistance—instead of which she feared her, and never felt at ease in her presence.

Outwardly, they were no doubt well-behaved and submissive. But their good behaviour was merely a mask worn in their mother's presence, which concealed their real selves from her and from others. There was no deep feeling at work in their hearts. There was never any appeal made to their affections; to their sense of right, or their individual responsibility—no inculcation of principle, on which a superstructure of religion might be built. If they did wrong they were punished—that was all. Neither was punishment ever followed up by forgiveness and advice. They were never taught that their failings made their mother unhappy, and that for her sake they ought to try and not offend again—a doctrine which conveys so forcibly to young minds that their sins are displeasing to God, and that out of love to Him more than out of fear they should strive to overcome them. No! Nothing of all this. Nothing but the fear of punishment, and the dread of public remark. But, after all, it was not so much the training as the mother herself. Had her example been always good and attractive, her system might have succeeded better. Her own character was all unformed and undisciplined; she had not educated or trained herself, therefore how was it possible she could rightly train and educate others? The fact was, she was intensely selfish. She was an only child

and an heiress. She had always been indulged in everything, and been accustomed to have her own way, and to be worshipped and flattered by all. She had a strong will, a quick temper, and an immense idea of her own importance. She was clever, managing, and determined; worldly, and very ambitious. Was this a person likely to enter into all the difficulties and trials of child life?—to put herself in her children's place, and to view the unfolding chart of life with their wondering puzzled eyes? No! She had her place in the world, and the children had theirs. Hers immeasurably superior and important—theirs less than secondary, simply subservient to her, and to her will.

Some day it would be different, perhaps. As grown-up girls and boys she might hereafter allow them to assume some individuality; but at present they were just children—a mere flock of sheep to be driven according to her way, without any distinction. She made certain rules, and they were to follow them—that was all. If they didn't, they were punished—there was no middle course. She was not fond of children. A child was to her raw material, out of which something might be made some day; but *as a child* it did not interest her. The society of children gave her no pleasure.

Perhaps this arose from idleness, perhaps from selfishness, perhaps from stupidity.

She found it a great trouble to provide answers to their questions, and was bored to find that when she had answered one it gave rise to another. She was too

selfish to come down from the heights of her own mature reflections, and to lower herself to the level of the baby questioner. Perhaps, in spite of her vaunted cleverness, she was too stupid or too ignorant to satisfy their curiosity. It requires no small amount of knowledge to parry successfully the questions of an enquiring child-mind.

The questioning child is never the favourite in the nursery, because it is often beyond the nurse's power to satisfy its thirst for information; and so she is often floored, and feels lowered by having her ignorance exposed.

Anyhow, from whatever cause it arose, Mrs. Middleton was not fond of children; she did not understand them; she had not realized that self must be put on one side before she could really train or influence them; and the consequence was that she had no real influence over them, and they neither loved nor respected her.

Of direct attempts there was no lack. Lecture by the hour would Mrs. Middleton; precept upon precept, rule upon rule, she would sometimes shower upon her little daughters when complaints against them were brought before her. But they saw her at times when she was not thinking of them, and they had, alas! learnt to discover her inconsistencies, and to compare the purity of her theories with the faultiness of her practice. What was the good, for instance, of her punishing them for an outbreak of temper, when they could see, by her flushing cheek and raised voice, that her own was not under her control? Did they not

intuitively feel that it was not so much that they had sinned, as that they had wounded their mother's *amour propre*, or irritated her nervous temper; and that they were suffering from revenge, not punishment; that it was only because they were the weaker that they went to the wall, since the sin was the same on both sides?

Vain was her teaching while her conduct was at variance with it. For there is a great and important difference between direct and indirect influence, which is well defined thus: 'Our direct efforts to teach may be contradicted by our lives, while the indirect influence is our very life.'

Strict is the watch a mother should keep over herself in her children's presence, lest they lose belief in the goodness, justice, and love which is to lead them to God, and of which, till they know Him, she is to them the embodiment. Let them believe in one person, though all others fail them. She should be on her guard lest their sense of right and justice get marred by her inconsistency, their affections chilled by her changeability, or their minds confused in striving to reconcile her teaching with her daily conduct.

Surely a mother's should indeed be a life of prayer while contending with such difficulties as these, for she is but human herself. But with such an end in view it is worth the struggle; for all through life her children will have the memory of at least one person whom they could safely believe in, and be helped by that recollection, even amidst all the sin and darkness around them, to have faith in the divinity of this human nature which

our Saviour condescended to assume. In that other mother in our story, to whom we have only, as yet, slightly alluded, was a bright pattern and example for ever before Mrs. Middleton; but her eyes were closed to her young sister-in-law's merits, and she saw no ways perfect but her own.

Magdalen Lyndsay had, in the training of her boy, acted in every way contrary to Mrs. Middleton's ideas, and Mrs. Middleton despised her system accordingly. But the fact was, Magdalen Lyndsay had no 'system.' Love and complete confidence existed between her and her boy, and on that foundation she built.

Mervyn had never had any inconsistencies to confuse him in his mother, or anything to shake his firm abiding belief in her. He knew that when an obedience was exacted from him which conflicted with his own wishes, it was for the love of him, or for some wise reason, that it was demanded. He looked for, and expected, the cheering tone of encouragement, the bright smile of approval; and with the help of them, and for the sake of them, he made efforts to overcome his faults, the very idea of which would have been Greek to Nina Middleton.

Magdalen had never brought Self to bear in any way against her boy; she had never allowed herself to be *personally* irritated by his faults, or *outwardly* vexed if her time was broken in upon.

Ten times out of twenty these are the real causes of children's offences. It is not so much *what* they are saying or doing at the time, as that they have chosen a

time which is inconvenient to us for saying or doing it; and had it happened when we were disengaged, or been in a different frame of mind, or better temper, we should have seen no offence in it. No wonder that children get puzzled when they find that what passed without remark one day is a terrible offence the next, and that what was looked upon as a crime yesterday may be done with impunity to-day.

Magdalen had been alive to all these dangers, and had striven to steer clear of them. All she asked in return was reverence and obedience; and these Mervyn had never, as yet, failed to render.

No more, to be sure, had Nina; obedience at least, as far as her mother knew. But herein lay the difference. Mervyn's character was as an unrolled map to his mother, and she knew every part of it well. She could answer for him as for herself. Nina's was as a sealed book to hers; and if Mrs. Middleton thought she could answer for her, or depend upon her obedience, it was only because she never thought about it at all. She had no more idea of the strength of character, the strength of purpose and will, or the power of resistance and rebellion, which lay behind the girl's impassive exterior, than she had of the powers of affection which dwelt there equally hidden.

No! no one knew what went on in the heart of the child, who was called 'odd, cold, unaccountable.'

No one guessed what depths of tenderness existed under her apparent indifference; walled in, and kept

down by the sensitive pride which had become a second nature.

Long had they lain there dormant, unsuspected and uncalled for, till the birth of little Totty, the first of all Mrs. Middleton's children who had not been a highly satisfactory baby—a baby that she was proud to show if sent for—fine, forward, and healthy.

Till he appeared, Mrs. Middleton's babies had all been framed after the same pattern; had stood their vaccination well, cut their teeth at the proper time, ran alone when she thought it time they should do so, fallen into all her plans for their feeding and sleeping, and yielded to treatment directly if by any chance they fell ill.

But alas! poor little Totty was a sad exception to all this. A wailing, suffering baby from his birth, he ran counter to his mother's rules in every way. He was weeks getting over his vaccination; he cut every tooth late; he had not attempted to crawl at the age when the others ran alone; and at two years old he had still to be put to sleep by being carried up and down the room. Perhaps this was, in Mrs. Middleton's eyes, the greatest offence of all. It was one of her most stringent rules, and no doubt a very good one, that her babies should, at as early an age as possible, be put into bed, and left to go to sleep by themselves. The others had fallen into the way of it very soon, as healthy children will; but with Totty it was almost an impossibility. He would lie awake for hours crying, unless soothed and hushed like a baby.

For a long time Mrs. Middleton had persevered; the

nurses were obliged to obey her, and poor Totty had to be put into his crib awake, to cry himself to sleep alone. But no one could bear to hear the wail of the delicate child proceeding from the bedroom nursery, and the nurses often broke through Mrs. Middleton's rules. It was no difficult matter, since she so seldom visited the nurseries. She laid down rules, and took it for granted they were followed, but she was by no means often enough with the children to see that they were carried out. So it was only by chance that she every now and then discovered that Totty was still put to sleep. Each time she put a stop to it, and laid down stricter regulations than ever. But it was no use. Totty suffered from want of sleep or exhaustion from crying; and even the doctor at last told Mrs. Middleton that the child must, for his health's sake, be humoured, till he was older and stronger. It was her first defeat. As he grew older she renewed her attempts to get him into better habits, but seldom with any success.

It was never clearly given out what was the matter with Totty; but the real truth was there was something the matter with his spine, which the doctors greatly feared would one day develop into distinct disease of the spine. But it had by no means reached that stage yet. He could stand alone now; but though nearly four years old, he rarely attempted to walk, neither did the doctors wish that he should. His chest was delicate, too, and he had once had an attack of inflammation of the lungs, which had left him very liable to catch bad colds.

He was a lovely little fellow, and singularly intelligent. Though he might fall short of his brothers and sisters in many ways, in face there was not one that could in any way compare with him. But an ambitious woman like Mrs. Middleton was not content with this. She looked on to the future, and saw that the day would never come when she should be proud of this son as she would be of the others. If it had been in the case of a girl, it would not have mattered so very much; but a delicate, puny man!

Perhaps Totty's deficiencies would not have been so apparent, if he had not, when he was eighteen months old, been succeeded by a baby sister who more than came up to the standard of the Middleton baby; who was even stronger, finer, and more forward; who walked, in short, in all the paths Mrs. Middleton had marked out; and who raced after poor little Totty with such speed, that now, at a year and a half, she ran about out of doors, while Totty still was driven in a perambulator.

Nina was of some age when Totty was born; and to begin with, the tiny ailing child, who seemed always crying and in pain, excited her pity; it was such a new thing in their nursery. With a child's quickness, she soon began to suspect that her mother was a little bit annoyed by it, and was rather ashamed of the puny, pale-faced baby. Mooning over it by herself, the suspicion became daily more confirmed in her mind; and any chance word that Mrs. Middleton let fall upon the subject strengthened it, till at last it became a cer-

tainty. From thinking Totty was overlooked, she grew to think he was despised; and from allowing to herself that he was despised, she persuaded herself that he was ill-treated. Then woke there up in her heart the pity that is akin to love. Then came the sense of loving protection towards the sickly child, and the determination to take its part against everybody, and to be to it the defender that it seemed to her to need so much. Alas! that so pure a feeling should have been mixed with antagonistic ill-will towards her mother; so that Nina was both at her best, and at her worst, when she loved her little brother.

Day by day her love for him deepened. It grew with her growth, and strengthened with her strength; while, with characteristic pride, she strove to hide it from her mother and from everyone. It was her cherished secret, and such it remained; since no one, except perhaps the nurse, guessed at it.

Nina's character in the house was that she was not fond of children; that she did not care for her younger brother and sisters.

Her mother often remarked, 'Some girls make such nice little elder sisters, but Nina doesn't seem to care for the younger ones at all.' Of such remarks Nina would take no notice, only pursing up her mouth, and hugging her secret tighter than ever, laughing to think how wrong they all were; while her expression of countenance would be taken for pride and temper, and her mother be confirmed in her opinion that she was a most odd, unaccountable child.

As Totty grew older and Nina loved him more and more, she grew so sensitive about him that her heart would beat when his name was mentioned, and his constitution discussed; and to hide it, she always put on an air of indifference whenever he was spoken of.

When Totty was succeeded by another baby, she felt him to become more hers than ever. Deeper and deeper grew her love and her pity, when she saw the other child wax stronger and finer month by month, while poor little Totty seemed to make no progress at all; and angry feelings would rise in her heart when she heard one child held up to the deterioration of the other. She could not bear to hear them compared, and her heart would beat loudly when she heard hints every now and then dropped in the nursery that the baby would walk first. How anxiously she watched them both; and how to the last she hoped against hope!

Yet, as we have said, at eighteen months the baby ran about everywhere, while Totty looked on from his perambulator. No one knew the storm of feeling which swept over the child when Totty was openly overlooked, by being left in the nursery, while the baby was sent for to see visitors in the drawing-room.

Poor child! the complications of troubles that she went through on his account were many; but still, in spite of them all, it was better for her and happier than that indifference to everything and everybody which had distinguished her before she had a Totty on whom to expend her affection. And yet her mother had never

noticed the change, and was perfectly ignorant of the girl's power of affection!

Mrs. Middleton had indeed a good deal to discover. She was content, so far, with the outward covering of good behaviour Nina wore in her presence; but she had yet to learn what an obedience is worth which is not founded on religion, love, or veneration. There was an expression sometimes in the handsome little face which would have led an acute observer to wonder how far that outward covering would avail if any real cause of antagonism should ever arise, and to fancy that, if it should ever be thrown off, it would be war to the knife between mother and daughter! Whether such a fancy would be correct or not, the events of the story will show.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW RELATION AT LUNCHEON.

THERE was something the matter with Mademoiselle the next morning at breakfast, for she was silent and moody, and hardly answered Nina when she asked her if she didn't think the butter was much better iced than usual.

It was evident that Nina was rather in disgrace, for Mademoiselle's manner to Cecily was quite different. Seeing how matters stood, Nina, with her usual indifference, simply refrained from any further attempts at conversation, and ate her breakfast in silence. There was a new-comer at breakfast—the rosy five-year-old boy, by name Edmund. He had just begun his schoolroom life by breakfasting with his sisters, and taking his morning walk with them. This was by way of familiarising him with the French language, as no other was allowed to be spoken at such times. Conversation at breakfast did not, under all these circumstances, flow rapidly. Edmund, to whom the arrangement had, as yet, all the charm of novelty, sat with a broad grin on his ruddy countenance whenever anyone spoke. His own part in the proceedings was limited to 'S'il

vous plaît,' when he wanted more bread and butter, and 'Merci' (by him pronounced in broad English 'Mercy'), when his wants had been supplied. One long sentence which Mademoiselle addressed to Cecily elicited his scorn, and he exclaimed, 'You're talking rubbish.'

Cecily was, of course, immediately assailed with a fit of giggling; and all three being now alienated, Mademoiselle broke up the breakfast party, and sent them all to dress for their walk. Edmund was in a terrible hurry to be off. The Guards march through a certain part of the park, playing their band, on their return from drill, and if the school-room party do not start in good time they will miss them. They get off presently; Edmund and Cecily in front, Nina and Mademoiselle behind; till they come to the first crossing, and then Mademoiselle calls the little boy to her side, and sends Nina on to join her sister.

'What's the matter with Mademoiselle, Cecily?'

'I don't know. She was all right at breakfast before you came down, and was talking away to me about her headache, and how she couldn't get to sleep, and all that sort of thing.' Nina was silent. She saw now the reason of the gloom. She had omitted to ask after Mademoiselle's headache!

'What made her talk about it?' she asked presently.

'Oh, I asked her if it was gone when she came down,' answered Cecily, 'and so then she told me all about it.'

Now this was a very old offence of Nina's. She

never could make up her mind to ask people after their headaches, and other little ailments. What was the most simple everyday affair to most people, was a great difficulty to her.

I fear this little heroine of mine will seem to many people a very disagreeable character, and they will think her mother fully justified in holding that opinion. It will, indeed, require the power of seeing 'the soul of goodness in things evil' to make them a little patient with her. But so many weaknesses spring from perverted good, and so many follies have their root in virtues, that perhaps the germ of good in the child's peculiar disposition may be found, if searched for. As extravagance springs oftentimes from lavish generosity gossip and curiosity, from an over-kindly interest in the affairs of others; so perhaps this want of courtesy and kindliness in Nina might spring from the innate truthfulness of the child's nature, over-strained and far-fetched though it might be. She was afraid of seeming more interested in the person than she really was; she could not say she was sorry when she knew she was not really grieved. Her idea of being sorry was something so very different. She did not, she told herself, know how to *look* while the person was answering her question. She couldn't be affected, and put *on* looks. If she might just run in and say 'How is your headache?' and rush away without waiting for the answer, she wouldn't mind half so much; but the standing there listening, and then not knowing what to say next, or how soon to begin talking of some-

thing else, all this made courteous enquiry a very difficult matter to Nina Middleton.

'At any rate it is too late now,' she told herself, as she walked silently along by Cecily's side.

Cecily was, as usual, full of talk.

'I say, Nina, you know a tandem, and you know a four-in-hand?'

'Yes,' said Nina, 'what of them?'

'What do you call a thing that is neither a tandem nor a four-in-hand?'

The extreme vagueness of the question made Nina hesitate.

'I'll tell you all that it *isn't*,' continued Cecily, 'and then you can tell me what it *is* easier. It isn't a barouche, nor a brougham, nor a dog-cart; it isn't a break, nor an omnibus, nor a t-cart, nor an Irish car, nor a waggonette, nor a landau, nor a pony-carriage, nor a cabriolet, nor . . . . . Oh dear! I'm so tired! . . . . . Well, Nina, it's none of those; what can it be?'

'What is it like?' asked Nina, 'and where did you see it?'

'It's got three horses, one in front of the other,' answered Cecily, 'and I saw it in the mews from my bed-room window. I'm sure it's quite a new thing, for I never saw it before.'

'I can't think what it can be,' said Nina.

'Perhaps it will be there when we go home,' said Cecily. 'I *wanted* so to see it start, but Mademoiselle called me just as the last horse was put in.'

They were just entering Kensington Gardens as she spoke, and Edmund, released from Mademoiselle, came running up to ask Cecily to play at horses, and the little sisters' conversation came to an end.

Kensington Gardens and Rotten Row, at that early hour on a summer's morning, present a very different appearance to Kensington Gardens and Rotten Row a few hours later in the day. From half-past eight to half-past ten or eleven, both are quite given up, as it were, to children.

Before the heat of the day has begun—while the trees wear that peculiar bright green which the day's dust will turn into brown, while the morning air is fresh and sweet—reigns all along the length of the Serpentine what may be called 'the children's hour.' There are tiny ponies, with tiny riders, sometimes led by grooms walking at the side, sometimes connected with big horses and careful old coachmen by long leading-reins. Babies in Spanish-saddles, jogging along close by the railings, where the nurse walks; plucky little boys tearing along at a hand-gallop; little girls with streaming hair racing after them, as quick as the groom will allow. They mostly laugh and talk as they ride along, and their voices sound merry in the still summer air, and their bright hair looks brighter in the summer sunshine.

Alongside, within the railings, are all the little walkers. They look so cool and fresh in their brown holland costumes, and shady hats—particularly the

babies, who lie lazily back in their perambulators, under the great shady awnings.

There is a pleasant hum of voices and laughter all round about, mingled with the clink of the horses' harness, and the refreshing sound of neighbouring water-carts.

The Serpentine looks cool and clear, gleaming in the sun; and the din of London traffic is so mellowed by distance as to be rather soothing than otherwise.

The scene altogether is so different to what it will be a few hours later, when to the lightheartedness and carelessness of the 'children's hour' will succeed one known well enough without description; when youth and beauty and fashion will crowd into the park, bringing with them cares, and aims, and interests unknown as yet to the chattering throng in full possession now.

Punctually at eleven the little Middletons left the park, and proceeded home. The town was beginning to stir as they reached Grosvenor Gate, and Cecily sighed deeply at the thought of returning to lessons. She flew to her window directly she got into her bedroom, but there was no sign as yet of the carriage she had mentioned to Nina.

Lessons occupied the rest of the morning, and at a quarter to two they were sent upstairs to get ready for luncheon. Cecily's head was out of the window in a moment, and as quickly drawn in.

'Nina! here it is, just come home; the three horses and all! Do come and look.'

Nina was washing her hands, and couldn't come directly.

'There are two gentlemen besides grooms. One is that young one we so often see, and a new one. He looks like a "How-*are*-you?" but I'm not quite sure. Now they've got out, and are patting the horses. Do come!'

Nina advanced to the window, and a deep colour overspread her face when, in the new gentleman, she recognised Lord Wardlaw.

'*Do* you know what it's called?' exclaimed Cecily, excitedly; 'isn't it a jolly carriage?'

'No, I don't,' Nina said absently, her eyes intent on the figure below; 'and Cecily, you'll be late if you don't get ready.'

She remained gazing at Lord Wardlaw, and thinking of Mervyn. She felt almost sure he was nice, and longed to write and tell Mervyn so. He was speaking to the groom about one of the horse's feet, and he seemed so kind about it. The other gentleman seemed to be pooh-poohing it, but Lord Wardlaw seemed to be insisting on having it attended to, and examined it carefully himself. Then a little child ran out of the stables, and he turned round and patted its head, and stooped down and talked to it. Nina thought she saw him put his hand in his pocket and put something into the child's hand, but was not quite sure. Then he spoke to his friend, and pointed to the house.

'He is saying he is coming here to luncheon,' thought Nina, and she blushed.

The other man seemed to say he would come to; and they walked off together, arm-in-arm. But as they went Nina noticed that Lord Wardlaw did not forget to turn round and nod to the little child he had been talking to, who stood in the middle of the road staring after them.

All this time Cecily had not begun to get ready; she had been so taken up with the horses and the new kind of carriage. To her horror the gong sounded, and Mademoiselle came in to fetch them.

'Oh, what shall I do?' she exclaimed.

Mademoiselle answered, she must come down alone, as it was better for one to be late than three. And so she and Nina proceeded downstairs, leaving poor Cecily in mortal terror. It was such a terrible offence to be late for luncheon. When they reached the dining-room they found no one there, and the butler informed them that Mrs. Middleton would not be down for ten minutes or so, but had sent word they were not to wait for her.

'And zee Cornel?' asked Mademoiselle.

The Colonel was engaged with two gentlemen, but would be in directly.

Nina felt her heart beat at the thought of so soon seeing Mervyn's step-father; and she wondered where he would sit. She had herself Mademoiselle on one side, and Cecily's vacant place on the other. She hoped he would sit exactly opposite, so that she might have a good look at him.

The door opened, and in came the three gentlemen. Nina, with the flush which excitement lent to her cheek,

was looking very handsome, and her father came up and kissed her.

'Good morning, my little woman.'

'Wardlaw, this is my eldest daughter. Nina, this is Lord Wardlaw. Mr. Leigh—Miss Middleton!'

And Colonel Middleton sat down, laughing. This was all against the rules. Mrs. Middleton never allowed any introductions to the little girls, and particularly disliked Nina being brought forward in this way. With her it was, 'Children, say how do you do to this gentleman,' but anything like the above introduction was quite against her principles. Mr. Leigh bowed as if Nina was grown up, and made some civil remark about the weather. Mrs. Middleton would have been furious if she had been there. Colonel Middleton, in his wife's absence, thought it rather a good joke.

'We shall have her out and dancing about in no time,' he said.

'The sooner the better,' answered Mr. Leigh.

But it was all lost upon Nina. Her eyes were fixed on Lord Wardlaw, wondering if he would remember her. She was not left long in doubt.

'We made friends in the park yesterday,' he said, in the kind voice which had attracted her before, coming up and taking her hand.

Nina got very red, and shy, and didn't know what to say; but she was conscious of a feeling of pleasure when Lord Wardlaw seated himself by her side.

'Something wrong, Wardlaw!' said Colonel Middleton, as he saw Lord Wardlaw looking enquiringly at

the silver mug and diminutive knife and fork in front of him.

Now the last thing Nina wished was to drive Lord Wardlaw away, but between shyness and truthfulness she did her best to do the very thing she did not want.

'You've got Cecily's place,' she said, bluntly.

'I'm sure I beg Cecily's pardon,' he said, smiling; 'what had I better do?'

'Nonsense, my dear fellow, don't trouble yourself to move. Have the things changed.'

And so, to Nina's great satisfaction, the arrangement was not altered.

'By the way, where is Miss Cecily?' said Colonel Middleton; 'late for luncheon! Lucky for her her mamma is late too.' And Colonel Middleton winked at Nina as he spoke.

But Nina did not smile. There was a loyalty in the child's nature, and a truthfulness which made anything underhand impossible to her. She knew she would not have smiled if her mother had been present, and so she was too honest to do it just because she was not there. She kept her eyes on her plate. None of this was lost upon Lord Wardlaw. Perhaps it was some qualities of this kind that had attracted him years ago to Magdalen Middleton.

At this juncture Cecily, looking shy and frightened, was seen trying to glide into the room unobserved. The change in her face when she saw her mother was not there was very remarkable.

'Come here, you rogue, and give me a kiss,' said

Colonel Middleton; 'what do you mean by being late?'

Cecily sprang to his side, delighted with her reception.

'Oh papa, it was looking at the carriage. I quite forgot to get ready.'

Colonel Middleton was rather anxious to trot his little girls out before their new relation, and encourage Cecily to converse.

'Sit down here, between me and Mr. Leigh, and explain yourself.'

The near vicinity of one of the heroes of the mews was too much for Cecily. She quite jumped at the name, and exclaimed: 'Oh! how very funny! I was wondering who it was.'

'You have not had long to wonder,' said her father; 'you have hardly been a minute in the room.'

'Oh! but I was wondering before,' said Cecily.

Everybody laughed.

'What do you mean?' asked Colonel Middleton. 'When have you seen that gentleman before?'

'I was watching him while I was getting ready for luncheon,' said Cecily. 'That's what made me late.'

'Upon my word,' said her father, 'I call this sort of thing quite romantic.'

'What do you call it?' exclaimed Cecily eagerly; 'that is just what I want to know.'

'Come, come,' said Colonel Middleton, 'you must explain yourself. What do you mean?'

'I mean,' she said, 'that I want to know what you

call a carriage that is not a waggonette, nor a t-cart, nor a tandem, nor——'

'My goodness, child!' exclaimed her father, 'one would think you had come straight from the mews!'

'So I have,' she answered, 'at least. . . .' and she broke off, astonished at the laughter with which her speech was received, and dismayed at a reproachful sound which broke from Mademoiselle. Nina now roused herself to speak, for she was expecting her mother to appear every moment, and feared Cecily might get into disgrace.

'Our bed-room window looks out on the mews, papa,' she said, 'and Cecily is very fond of watching what goes on there. Not our stables, you know, but a gentleman's; Mr. Leigh's, I suppose, as I sometimes see him there. There was a new kind of carriage there this morning, and Cecily has been wanting to know what it is called. It's got three horses, one in front of the other, and we saw Mr. Leigh and . . . you,' she added, turning to Lord Wardlaw, 'getting out of it this morning.'

'Oh! that's called a harum-scarum,' said Lord Wardlaw, kindly.

'If I want a clear sensible answer, I always get it out of Nina,' said Colonel Middleton. 'You're a harum-scarum sort of creature yourself, "Silly-Billy," and it's just the sort of carriage for you.'

'I shall be delighted to give Miss Cecily a drive in mine,' said Mr. Leigh.

'Oh, shouldn't I like it!' exclaimed Cecily, clapping her hands; and her face beamed with delight.

'Like what?' said a very decided voice, as the door opened.

Cecily's face clouded over with an expression of fear; her eyes dropped, and she went on eating her dinner. Colonel Middleton looked uneasy, and Nina disturbed; for Mrs. Middleton had entered the room. She greeted both guests with warmth, especially Lord Wardlaw, and took her seat at the head of the table.

'I feel as if I have disturbed a conversation,' she said blandly; 'I heard such a babel of voices as I came along.'

'We were talking about harum-scarums,' said Lord Wardlaw.

'I have a great dislike to that kind of foolish carriage,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'I always think a young man must be either very idle or very foolish who sets up anything of the kind. I shall never allow my sons to do such a thing.'

There was rather an awkward silence after this speech. Mr. Leigh looked very uncomfortable; he was very young, not much more than a boy, and he dreaded Mrs. Middleton's scorn.

There was a twinkle in Lord Wardlaw's eye, and he was the first to speak.

'I am afraid, Mrs. Middleton, you will have a very poor opinion of me when I tell you I have been driving in one this morning.'

Now nothing could make Mrs. Middleton think badly

of Lord Wardlaw. He was in the highest favour. She answered graciously, 'It would take a great deal to make me alter my opinion of Lord Wardlaw, and I am quite sure idleness and folly could not be mentioned in connection with his name. Some other motive must have been at work.'

'Probably drove with a friend to prevent his breaking his neck,' suggested Colonel Middleton, winking at Mr. Leigh, who blushed crimson.

But here Cecily, who had been struggling hard to repress it for some minutes, broke into such a fit of giggling that the conversation was brought to an abrupt termination.

Mrs. Middleton could hardly believe her ears, and was turning indignantly towards her to order her out of the room, when Lord Wardlaw interposed.

'I must intercede,' he said. 'This conversation, coming so close upon that which preceded it, has been a little too much for the child. Will you trust me to explain it to you, and, meanwhile, overlook the transgression for this time—as the first favour I have asked on entering the family,' he added in a lower tone; and Mrs. Middleton at once gave in.

It would be hard to say whether Mr. Leigh or Cecily was the most relieved by this arrangement. The former had feared Lord Wardlaw was going to declare him the owner of a harum-scarum, and poor Cecily had been in agonies. Nina, too, had been on thorns; but her opinion of Lord Wardlaw rose higher and higher, and as she left the dining-room she told herself that, far from

being to be pitied, Mervyn was to be envied on the acquisition of so charming a step-father.

There was a feeling of freedom all over the house that afternoon, for Mrs. Middleton and her husband went to a breakfast soon after four o'clock, and were not expected home till late at night. Extra strictness is apt to produce eye-service, and Mrs. Middleton's household was no exception to the rule. Everyone, from the governess down to the footman, children included, felt as if a weight were lifted off their minds, and began to turn over in their thoughts how best to avail themselves of the opportunity afforded them.

> When the cat's away
> The mice do play.

And every mouse in the establishment thought of some little game. Mademoiselle went off to tea with a friend, leaving the school-room under Nina's care. The head nurse went to the play, deputing all her duties to the nurserymaid. Cecily and Edmund, directly tea was over, made an inroad into the drawing-room, and amused themselves by looking at the photograph-books, &c., which were, as a rule, denied to them; and Nina went up to the nursery, and carried Totty into her bedroom to spend the evening with her. Cecily also made a minute examination of all the invitations in the looking-glass over the chimney-piece, and tried to calculate how many times her father and mother would dine out that week. Meanwhile Edmund went on the balcony, climbed over into the adjoining one, and peeped in at

the neighbour's windows. But the sound of niggers coming down the street distracted them both, and they flew off to carry the news to Nina and Totty.

She was sitting on the floor with her little brother in her arms, talking softly to him, or singing him little songs; and when the others burst in with their news she answered sharply that she did not care about niggers. For she resented the interruption, and their noisy entrance had startled the nervous child in her lap.

The animation, however, which shone in Totty's pale little face at the news, made her pause, and bending her head over him, she whispered tenderly,

'Would Totty like to see them?'

'What are they like?' asked Totty.

'They are black men, darling, and they sing and dance.'

Totty shuddered.

Evidently he had not been prepared for the nature of the entertainment.

'Must I really go?' he said, fearfully.

'O yes, Totty,' said Edmund. 'Come on; they're jolly men, you know.'

But Nina, meeting the appealing glance of the great blue eyes, settled it for him in a moment. Throwing her arms round him, she assured him that no one and nothing should make him see anything he did not like.

'Totty's a muff,' said Edmund; but fortunately for him Nina did not hear.

Then he and Cecily ran off again, and the brother and sister were left alone.

'We're happier without them, ain't we darling? and we'll go on looking at the pictures.'

Then, as it got later, and he grew weary, she pillowed his head on her shoulder and sang softly to him in the gathering twilight.

Song after song he called for, joining in sometimes himself, but for the most listening quietly, and following the events of the tales contained in the quaint old ballads with eager interest.

The crowning favourite was kept to the last, and sung slowly and distinctly, that he might follow the sense:

Lord Thomas
He was
A forester bold
And hunted
The king's brown deer,
And Eleanor
She
Was a faire maiden,
He
Loved her dear.

On and on, through the twelve or thirteen stanzas, of which the ballad is composed.

Totty was half asleep towards the end, but kindled into sudden enthusiasm at the thrilling consummation.

He cut off
His
Own brown wife's head,
And threw it against the wall!!

'Oh, Nina! did he really?'

This question would always come whenever the verse

was sung; and Nina, seeing the shrinking in his eyes, would always answer,

'No, darling, not really; it's only a *tale*.'

She had once said *story*; but this had so confused truth and falsehood in Totty's mind, and made him so fearful of how far Nina herself might be implicated in the untruth, that she had since substituted the word 'tale.'

'Only a tale, darling, that's all.'

'But is it a joke, Nina?'

'Yes, darling, it's a kind of joke.'

'A kind of a sort of a joke,' he would repeat rather anxiously; 'isn't it, Nina?'

Nina had tried leaving out the verse altogether, but he always discovered this and asked for it. In spite of his fear, it fascinated him, and he would not for the world have allowed her to miss it.

'Now again,' he said sleepily, just as she had safely reached the end of the fourteenth verse; and Nina, unmurmuring, began all over again.

He was fetched to bed at seven, and then she went and joined the others on the drawing-room balcony.

CHAPTER V.

THE HERO'S HOME.

'HERE! Beth-Gelert. Here! halloa, old fellow!'

The hills all around caught up the sound of the fresh young voice, and echoed it from one to the other.

'Not there! old Stupid! Here!' rang out the merry tones again, and again the hills reverberated, 'Not there! old Stupid! Here!'

And then such a ringing laugh pealed through the air, that the old hills sounded mad with joy as they took it up, and repeated it again and again.

Mervyn Lyndsay put down his books on a bit of rock, and bounded lightly up the sides of one of the hills, till he reached a spot from whence he could command a better view of the surrounding country; and there he stood, shading his eyes with his hand from the setting sun, and looking eagerly round in search of something.

The old Welsh hills looked down admiringly on the graceful figure and the bright young face—the only animate things to be seen in that secluded spot.

Save one—the dog Beth-Gelert, who, confused by the echoes, had been careering along in the opposite direction to join his young master, and who now, having

given up their meeting as a bad job, was running at full speed towards Glen-Mervyn, the boy's ancestral home.

It was hidden away among the trees to the left, and only the chimneys could be seen, even from the high eminence where Mervyn now stood. Seeing at a glance the position of affairs, with another merry laugh, the boy bounded down the hill again, caught up his books, and ran at full speed towards the house, hoping to overtake the dog. By some short cut through a plantation, probably known only to himself, he reached the stables in a few minutes; where, on glancing at the stable clock, his face expressed astonishment, and he increased his speed.

Opening a back door, he ran through some passages, and emerged into a large old-fashioned hall, decorated with antlers and banners, and adorned with figures of old knights in armour. Then, pushing open a heavy oak door, he entered a long low drawing-room, and, throwing down his books and hat on the nearest table, he advanced to a bow window at the other end of the room, and exclaimed:

'Oh mother, darling! I'm sorry I'm so late. I hope I haven't kept you waiting for tea.'

The lady whom he addressed was sitting in the bow window, with an open letter in her hand, apparently lost in thought. Her head was turned towards the window, and her eyes were wandering over the beautiful Welsh country, which stretched away beyond the gardens and pleasure-grounds. She was quite young, and probably

looked even younger than she really was; too young, in fact, to be the mother of the well-grown boy who stood by her side. So deep was her absorption, that she did not even hear Mervyn's noisy entrance; and it was not till his voice sounded close to her that she woke from her reverie, and then she turned round with a start, and exclaimed:

'Is that you, darling? how you startled me!'

Mervyn was unfeignedly astonished.

'Me, mother! why of course it is I! Who else should it be?'

'To be sure,' said Mrs. Lyndsay, 'I don't know, as you say, who else it could be; but I don't think I was expecting you so soon.'

'So soon!' echoed Mervyn; 'why I am so dreadfully late that I thought you would be wondering what had become of me! Why, mother! do you know it is half-past five?'

'Is it possible?' said his mother; but she still answered rather absently, and her eyes seemed to have an irresistible inclination to wander again to the distant mountains.

'But tell me, dear,' she continued, as with an effort she shook off her reverie, and rose from her seat, 'what is it makes you so late? And, my child, how hot you are!' she concluded, laying her hand against his flushed cheek.

As she moved from her chair, the letter, which had been lying on her lap, fell to the ground, and as Mervyn picked it up and gave it to her, he could not help

seeing that she flushed slightly, and rather hastily took it from his hand. He was puzzled for a moment, but he soon forgot the passing feeling in the excitement of relating his adventures with Beth-Gelert, to which his mother listened with all her usual interest and animation.

Magdalen Lyndsay, as the reader is already aware, was a widow, and Mervyn was her only child. She had married early a man many years her senior, and he had died eighteen months after, leaving her sole guardian of her son and of his property. We will glance at her individual history from the time of her husband's death.

It seemed to her her duty to live herself, and to bring up her boy, among his own people, and in his forefather's home; and so, in spite of the objections raised by her relations, and especially by her brother, she settled always to spend eight months of the year at Glen-Mervyn. Colonel Middleton represented to her the loneliness of such an arrangement; 'buried alive' as he called it, in a solitary part of Wales, with a child who was too young to be a companion. But she resisted all his attempts to induce her to make a home in London, and to content herself with flying visits to Glen-Mervyn. She was not only Mervyn's mother, she argued, but sole manager of his property till he should come of age to undertake it himself. Her husband had placed trust in her by his will, and she was determined to prove herself worthy of his confidence. She promised she would always come to London for four months in the

year, and hoped all her relations would visit her at Glen-Mervyn whenever they felt inclined; and for the rest of the time, she said, if she could not be contented with a beautiful home and plenty of occupation, a child, and youth, and health with which to enjoy it all, she thought she must be a very poor creature indeed.

Her brother, who looked upon her as a child herself, could not at all see the force of this argument. 'Really Magdalen,' he said, 'you must be very conceited if you think the estate cannot get on quite well without you. A better-ordered, better-managed property cannot be; and surely a land-steward, who has lived so many years upon it, does not require *you* to tell him what to do.'

'All very true,' his sister answered; 'but I have great faith in the master's eye.'

'Master's eye, yes,' he repeated contemptuously; 'but the eye of a girl of your age is not exactly the same thing. And what on earth can you, who have lived all your life in a London street, know about managing a property?'

'You forget, Rowley, that I have been married eighteen months, and lived all that time on the very property of which you are speaking.'

'Eighteen months! your experience must be vast, truly!'

'Greater than you think, perhaps,' said Magdalen, as her thoughts reviewed those eighteen months of close companionship with a man, who, though old enough to be her father, had always insisted on her taking interest in his pursuits; and by this means had instilled into

her mind much that she would never have dreamt of enquiring into; for which knowledge, little as it had interested her at the time, she was grateful now, since it would enable her to undertake her new duties.

'As to the dulness,' she added, 'I am used to it, and . . . .' But here she broke off, for not even to her brother would she confess how dreary that eighteen months of married life had been, owing to her husband's jealous temperament, which, though she knew it sprang from over-affection, had been very hard to bear. Hence their secluded life; for he could not bear that any but himself should engross her attention for a minute. He could not bear her interest diverted from him and his interests for a single instant. He was jealous even of her occupations, if they tended in any way to the neglect of himself; jealous of the care she bestowed on the poor; jealous of her relations; jealous of her love for her baby boy. But Magdalen had been marvellously patient with him, for she had recognised through it all, and been grateful for, the love which prompted it. Gratitude was a very prominent feature in her character. She had married him from gratitude, borne with him through gratitude; and now, with a feeling of gratitude for his memory, she was eager to devote her life to following out his wishes. But she was half conscious all the time that life looked brighter; that the prospect of Glen-Mervyn, with her boy, which seemed so dull to others, was to her, by comparison with the life she had led there, suffused with light and hope and enjoyment; and that the days that were coming in the old Welsh

home, relieved of the perpetual strain of trying to satisfy an affection which never *could* be satisfied, would be very very pleasant. But all this she could not, and would not, tell; and therefore she broke off her sentence hurriedly, fearing she had said too much.

'I don't understand you, Magdalen,' said Colonel Middleton; 'nor can I conceive a girl of your age voluntarily exiling herself in that way. You will grow morbid and unsociable, and be an old woman before your time.'

His sister laughed merrily at the idea.

'You must try and prevent that by coming very often to stay with me, dear Rowley. You and Lydia must look upon Glen-Mervyn as a second home, to come and go when you like, and always with as many children as you like to bring.'

And so the argument ended for that time, to be renewed again and again, and always with the same result. Magdalen was firm, and no amount of talking made her waver in her resolution for a moment. She settled at Glen-Mervyn shortly afterwards, and it had been her home from that time until the day on which this chapter opens. It was not such utter seclusion, after all. In the shooting season the house was always more or less full of relations; and the early months of the year she spent in London, returning to Wales in June. Those years had been singularly uneventful and singularly peaceful. Care and anxiety had been unknown, and sorrow had held aloof from Glen-Mervyn.

In the management of the property, in the care of the

poor, in forwarding every scheme for the improvement and well-being of all around her; and above all, in the education and training of her boy, Magdalen Lyndsay had found occupation and interest, and in them had been satisfied. Beloved and esteemed by all, responsible mainly for the well-being of those around her for many miles; with youth and health with which to enjoy everything, and wealth sufficient to gratify every passing desire—her life was neither empty nor dull. Useful, responsible, powerful, and respected, what more did she want? Only affection; and even that was hers; for as her boy grew on, he developed such strong affections, and such devotion to herself, that she had no longing to soothe, and no feeling unsatisfied. He showed a care and a thought for her beyond his years —a protecting kind of love which was very touching in a boy of his age.

From his earliest childhood he had been accustomed to be told—'Take care of her, Mervyn; you are all she has.' 'Remember, Mervyn, she has no one but you.' And such admonitions had sunk into his childish heart, and brought forth abundant fruit as years went on. He seemed completely to understand his position of 'the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.' He was full of little cares, little attentions; wonderfully thoughtful for her, and careful of her; unselfish as a woman; obedient to her slightest wish. He had never given her pain in his life, had ever treated her with reverence, and his childish faults she had always been able to reach through his affections. Sometimes, re-

flecting on his character, she had told herself that he was faultless—marvellously perfect. To be sure, he had few temptations. He was singularly free from the faults of boyhood; but then his life and position had made him old for his years; open as the day, but then there had never been any need of concealment. He had always felt himself responsible for his mother's happiness and well-being. Felt it, and gloried in it; and even rather resented any interference from relations. Perhaps, if any fault had been engendered by his life with her, it was a slight inclination to monopolise her attention, and to feel restless and injured if by any chance he could not get that exclusive devotion from her to which he was accustomed.

Magdalen had seen it was her duty to prevent his growing too dependent on her; and made up her mind to resign his education into other hands, even before she sent him to school. She had, therefore, made arrangements with the vicar of the parish to receive and teach him for so many hours a day. No one but herself knew what a sacrifice it was, nor how she missed his companionship. But where her boy's good was concerned, Magdalen never thought of herself.

Considering all this, it may well be imagined that Mervyn should be rather surprised at her not discovering he was late; at her admission that he had startled her; and at her exclamation, 'Is that *you*, darling?' As if in wide Wales it could be anyone else! He thought it over in the pretty drawing-room after they had had their tea, and his mother had gone upstairs to

put on her riding-habit; and his reflections were not altogether pleasant. What could she have been thinking of so earnestly when he came in? What was that letter she had in her hand, to which she did not make any allusion? Why had she seemed so anxious to recover it when it fell from her hand? Was it all connected with something he was not to know? It was so unusual to find her doing nothing—she was always occupied about something. Seldom had he seen her so abstracted. Thinking of this, it for the first time crossed his mind that she had been rather thoughtful ever since they returned to Glen-Mervyn from London, three weeks ago. Several times he remembered lately he had found her unoccupied and rather absent, and was conscious that she had now and then failed a little in her usual unflagging interest in what he was saying.

What could it all mean, and had it anything to do with that mysterious letter? And *why* should he call it mysterious, he questioned the next minute. 'Mother has no secrets from me,' he mentally exclaimed; 'and I shall certainly ask her all about it directly she comes down. I wonder why I didn't ask her directly.'

And yet he felt there had been something in his mother's face, and in her complete avoidance of any explanation, that would make it difficult to approach the subject naturally; and if there was to be any constraint, it was better to leave it alone altogether. Constraint!—between him and his mother! The very idea made the poor boy's lip quiver, and he smiled, or rather tried to smile, at the bare thought of such a thing; but

the smile died away almost directly, and left his face very grave indeed.

What could it be? Was any misfortune hanging over them? What misfortune *could* there be as long as they were well and together? Unless . . . . The old bug-bear—school! Could his officious uncle be urging his being sent there at once, instead of waiting, as had always been decided, till next Christmas?

Mervyn was accustomed to his uncle's coming forward on every occasion to further his being sent to school, and always greatly resented it. What other misfortune could be impending, if not this?

He brooded over it, making himself quite miserable, till a sound reached his ears, which reassured him at once. It was his mother's voice from her window overhead, singing as she dressed; and the voice was so gay, so ringing, that Mervyn forgot his fears directly, and felt his spirits rise with the clear high notes of her song, till he forgot everything in the pleasure of listening to it. His mother would not sing like that if sorrow were impending. His mother would not sing like that if he were going to be taken from her.

And with a sigh of relief he lay back in an arm-chair, and told himself he had been frightened for nothing. He sat there, gazing round the room, and thinking how pretty it was, and mentally comparing it with the prim little parlour at the Vicarage he had just quitted. With his mother's voice in his ears, he went off into a reverie about her. There was no one like her in the wide world—no one. Everything about her

seemed to catch her charm, and instantly to become different from things about other people.

How different, for instance, was the room in which he was sitting from the vicar's prim little drawing-room which he had just quitted. There was no particular thing he could take hold of to admire; he was not sufficiently master of the subject to say wherein consisted its charm; he only knew, or rather felt, in a boy's vague way, that it was all just as perfect as it could be. Wherever the eye wandered, it rested content. The chairs were just in the nooks and corners where they were most cosy; there were pretty little tables, and pretty china in odd corners. There was no unused look about the room, no stiffness or formality, yet no untidiness; no lack of signs of employment, though it had no occupant, since early morning, but herself. There was work on one table, books on another; the piano was open, and the leaves of a piece of music fluttered in the soft wind that blew in at the window, as if some one had lately risen from it. There were flowers in different parts of the room, arranged in a sort of natural luxuriance peculiar to a lady, to which few others can ever attain. So unlike, thought Mervyn, the stiff little rows of flowers in the vicar's 'parlour,' one row red, one blue, one yellow, without a leaf or morsel of green to relieve the mass of colour. As unlike his mother's arrangement as the vicar's prim maiden sister was unlike his mother herself.

The big bow-window opened on to the garden, and there again his mother's taste was displayed in the

pretty laying out of the beds, and harmony of colour. There was a pair of gardening gloves, and a watering-pot lying by one of the beds; everything showed signs of life and employment, though he knew for certain that no one but herself had been there all day.

A light step sounded on the oak floor outside, and the concluding words of the song. And then his mother came in in her riding-habit. She stopped at the table to take up his hat, and put his books in a heap.

'Untidy boy,' she said, smiling; 'when will you remember to leave your hat in the hall!'

Mervyn jumped up to take it away; but Mrs. Lynd say stopped him as he was rushing off with it, and said,

'You had better put it on your head instead now, dear, for the horses are at the door.'

CHAPTER VI.

WHY MERVYN AND HIS MOTHER WERE LATE FOR DINNER.

It was a lovely summer evening as mother and son rode off from the house. Their way lay through the wildest and most beautiful part of the property; the sun was not yet beginning to set. Conversation never flagged for a moment; questions and answers followed in quick succession. The hills echoed their merry laughter, and the sound of Mervyn's shouts to Beth-Gelert. The sun had sunk to rest some time before they turned their faces homeward. They rode slowly back to Glen-Mervyn, in the soft twilight; every now and then disturbed in their conversation to bid good-night to the passers-by in their picturesque Welsh attire, returning from their day's work; or even to rein up their horses altogether, while Mrs. Lyndsay stopped to enquire into the welfare of those more particularly known to her.

The ride terminated in a brisk gallop, which brought them back to Glen-Mervyn just as the dressing-bell was ringing, and Mrs. Lyndsay, dismounting, ran up to dress. Mervyn was not so long dressing as she, so he did not think it necessary to follow her example at once.

He was in high spirits; the thought which had troubled him had passed away, dispelled by the pleasure of his ride; and he stood chatting to the groom about an impending cricket-match in the village, in which he was to take a part, and of which his head was full. He could have remained there for ever, discussing it, and slashing off the heads of the flowers with his riding-whip; but the groom was obliged to return to the stables, and so the conversation came to an end.

Magdalen Lyndsay, meanwhile, now that her boy's eyes are no longer on her, has returned to the reverie which his entrance some hours before had interrupted; and leaning against the window in her riding-habit, her eyes are wandering once more to the old Welsh hills, and her mind is again revolving the question it was revolving then. How is she to tell him that which she has to tell? It is now nearly a fortnight since the question first presented itself to her mind, and she has found no answer yet.

The letter received that afternoon has shown her that she must lose no time; nay, that if possible, he must be told this very night. 'Oh, no,' says a voice in the mother's heart; 'no, not to-night; let him have one day more! He is so gay, so light-hearted this evening; his laugh is so ringing, his dear eyes so bright. No! not to-night! not to-night! It may rain to-morrow, and he may be less gay; and when the wind sighs round the mountains, and the rain drips against the window, making him dull and listless, it

will be easier for him to hear what she has to say. But to-night it is so sweet and fair; the air is so balmy, and all nature seems so gay. The birds and insects are singing and rejoicing; let him share in their gladness to-night. He must not be the one sad thing under the summer sky! Let him have one more evening in the garden with his mother all his own.' . . . What a dear bright face it is! The sunny smile and wavy hair, the frank sweet mouth, and honest speaking eyes; how familiar and how dear is it all to the mother's heart. And *she* is to be the one to bring a cloud over it! *Her* hand it is that is to lay a cross upon him, and tell him to take it up and bear it cheerfully. God knows how she has dreaded it! how she has hated the thought of inflicting pain upon him, and darkening, even though she feels it will be but for a moment, his happy young life.

And yet it must be done. Already all the arrangements are complete, and on that day three weeks she is to become Lord Wardlaw's wife. And as yet Mervyn knows not of the existence of such a person! Truly there is no time to be lost. But Magdalen has had a hard time of it lately, and she has not trusted herself yet to speak on the subject to her boy. It is only a fortnight since she has learnt the tale of her husband's treachery, and scarcely yet has she recovered from the confusion and indignation into which the revelation has thrown her. She has been living again lately in that olden time, and, bit by bit, she has been through it all once more. First, the quiet life with her father, in

their London home—even, uneventful; she the only young thing there, with no companions but the two old men. Then the days when she first knew Charlie Digby. What a charm his society had brought into her life, even before love grew up in her heart, when a closer acquaintance showed him to be all that was manly and true! Then had followed the intuitive conviction that he loved her, and the contented waiting on from day to day till he should speak, while she painted the scene of the happy future she felt so certain lay before her. Then the rude shock of his sudden departure without word or sign, without farewell; the sudden conviction that she had deceived herself, and been deceived; the bitter pain of the loss of his love, mingled with the wounded pride at being forsaken. Then the cold blank of life without a future; the lack of interest in everything; the loss of faith not only in him, but in the truth, and the virtue and the manliness of which he had been to her the embodiment; the return to the dull monotonous life with two old men. Then had come her father's illness and death, which had, in God's good providence, given a fresh turn to her thoughts. For the contact with pain and death taught her how insignificant is life, how fleeting its joys, and how short-lived its sorrows. Face to face with the tremendous reality of death, all else had seemed to her shadowy, and life dwarfed by the thought of eternity.

In this frame of mind had she met the advances of the man who became her husband. It seemed to her to

matter so little, and to be for such a very little while. Also she was lonely and desolate, and filled with gratitude to her only friend, whose fidelity contrasted so favourably with the changeability of the man whom she had fancied loved her. At once and for ever she had cast aside all longings and repinings, sealed up the past, and striven to put it away. Charles Digby passed out of her life, and she gave herself heart and soul to her new duties. So much so, that when, after all those years, they met again, and, as we have seen, he asked her to link her fate with his, she felt it was impossible. That part of her life seemed so far away; it so completely belonged to her youth, that she felt quite unable to revive it. In fact, it seemed to her almost ridiculous that he should ask it. Besides, she had been disappointed in him. All that in Charles Digby had called forth her affection had proved to be her own creation; and the man she had loved had not been he, but a being of her own imagination, endowed with qualities which he did not possess.

She was too kind to tell him all this, but she firmly and definitely refused; and without giving him time to protest, she left London, as we have seen, and returned home.

Nor did she repent her decision. 'Oh no!' she said to herself often, as she thought it over in the calm solitude of Glen-Mervyn. 'Oh no. I am too old now to begin a fresh life, and I have seen too many changes to wish for more. I am happy and content in my present life, and I ask for nothing else. Besides, there is Mervyn. I am not free to choose my own life. I am a

mother, and motherhood and its duties is my life now. I live for him, not for myself. My life is laid out for me, and I have neither the wish nor the strength to begin life all over again.'

And in this frame of mind had Magdalen remained till the news contained in her brother's letter threw all her thoughts into confusion.

Colonel Middleton had never said a truer thing in his life than when he told his friend that, in withholding the truth from her, Lord Wardlaw was neglecting the most powerful argument in his own favour, her sense of justice being so strong. For she never hesitated from that moment as to what path to pursue. All the objections and all the arguments she had previously raised in her own mind, which seemed to her then so convincing and satisfactory, gave way before the one great motive of repairing that old injustice, and striving to atone for that past which she could never, never undo.

At once her mind was made up. She received her brother's letter one sunny morning while Mervyn was at the Vicarage; and long before he returned home, the letter which conveyed the expression of her determination was on its way to London. When he came bounding home in the afternoon, the promise which was to work such a change in his life was given, the days of his life alone with his mother were numbered; their happy dual solitude was already drawing to a close. He came along singing and jumping, making straight for the tree where she was sitting; with his eyes full of love, and his ears awaiting her words of loving welcome.

And she, stunned and bewilderod still, with her past and her present all marred and mingled, all linked and yet distorted, watched him blankly as he came along, almost shrinking from the sight of him she loved so dearly when she remembered whose son he was. Yet, by the time he reached her, she had so far controlled herself that there was nothing unusual in her manner, and he noticed nothing but that she looked pale and tired; and in his pretty, protecting way, he enquired if she had a headache, and ran off to hurry the afternoon tea. His loving little attentions brought tears into her eyes—those eyes that had been so dry and hard all day. She had indeed spent a terrible afternoon. The revelation of her husband's treachery had thrown all her past into confusion, and turned all her life into a sham. It seemed to her that the whole thing, with all its aims and motives, had been a delusion, a chimera, a thing of her own imagination. Gratitude had been the mainspring of all her actions, the governing impulse of her life; and now to find she owed him none!

All her devotion to him in his life-time, all her respect for his memory and his wishes since his death—all turned into foolishness and mockery. Love she had never naturally felt for him, but by infinite efforts, aided by her deep gratitude, she had attained to something like its counterfeit. And all the time she had owed him no gratitude, no respect even, no veneration—nothing! Less than nothing, worse than nothing—only contemptuous indignation and a burning sense of wrong.

All was chaos in her past · and she looked back upon

it, bewildered. The duty she had striven to fulfil to one man she had all the time owed to another; the feelings she had created and encouraged were those which ought never to have existed, while those she had struggled to stifle were just those she ought to have cherished.

Had she ever, in all her life, she asked herself, done what was right, or properly understood one human being with whom she had been thrown? Their images were now all so changed and confused that not one remained to her what she had fancied it to be. The kind old patron of her youth was lost in the designing, treacherous friend, and merged again in the over-affectionate and exacting husband. The Charlie Digby of her early days was not the Lord Wardlaw of to-day, but a mixture of what she had at first believed him, what she had afterwards supposed him, and what she had since discovered him to be: three distinct characters, now all confused together.

The father she had loved and venerated was gone, so changed that he seemed to be a stranger, for he had been privy to the deception, and his image could never again be to her the untarnished memory it had hitherto been. No one remained familiar; and she seemed to have been living all her days deceived—entangled in a web of delusions. And Magdalen, torn from all her accustomed moorings, felt herself drifting out into a sea of darkness and doubt.

From such shipwreck as this her boy's lips on her forehead saved her; and the tears which his caresses brought to her eyes, while they dimmed her outward

vision, dispelled her mental blindness, and she saw one light in the darkness, one spar to which she might cling —her child!

In the confusion of images which had bewildered her, his at least stood clear and well defined, consistent, loving, and unchanged; and whatever other duties she had mistaken or left undone, to this at least she had been faithful, and had performed it well. In all the landscape behind her, his figure was the clearest and the most familiar. Her years of motherhood extended over a space of time, compared to which her early friendship seemed a moment, and her married life a dream. The very thought of him enabled her to shake off her misty retrospection, and to return to the present moment. The dim figures sped away, and that of her boy took their place. They might seem shadowy and unreal, but there was nothing unreal about him. The past was her own and theirs: it was gone—past recall—there was no use dwelling upon it. What she could do to repair it she had done, and dreaming over it was idle and vain. But this young fresh life by her side, with whom the past had nothing to do, he has his part in her present and her future, and his must be considered too. The pure unselfishness of a mother's love made her forget her share in the matter, and turn her thoughts to his. How would the new future appear to him?

This question she felt was, after all, the most important now, and to find an answer to it her attention must be given. How was she to tell him of the change which was coming? It was a difficulty that must be

faced and surmounted, and she roused herself and gave her mind to the task.

To this frame of mind she had arrived when he returned with the tea; and as she met the loving glance of his eye, and marked the delight he took in ministering to her wants, a fear came into her heart of how the news would affect him. As she thought of how completely he had had her to himself all these years, and how accustomed he had always been to look upon her as his exclusive possession, the fear increased, and she resolved to put off the announcement for the present. She had gone through so much of agitation already, she had not the strength to encounter more. So she left the morrow to take care of itself, and gave herself up unrestrainedly to the pleasure of her boy's society, and the charm of his light-heartedness and youth.

'Why should I make him sad before the time?' she asked herself; and she lay back in her chair, watching him, and listening to him, rejoicing to see him so gay. He was always full of life and spirits, but that day he had seemed even more joyful than usual. His father had been of a morbid mopy disposition, but the boy inherited from his mother the happy quality of turning every little thing into enjoyment, and finding amusement everywhere.

As he sat there, chatting and laughing, recounting little things that had happened at the Vicarage, his mother gazed at him with fond pride and affection; and the heart that had so lately glowed with contemptuous indignation towards the father was filled with loving

admiration for the son. Then, when she met the honest speaking eyes, and drank in the frank open smile, she inwardly murmured: 'Thank God; there is nothing of his father about him. Thank God he never knew him—cannot remember ever to have seen him.'

Day after day from that time she had put off telling him what she knew would cause him pain. Every day she said to herself, 'To-morrow.' Yet when the morrow came she had ever some reason to assign to herself, why it should be put off still.

It is now, as we have said, nearly a fortnight since her resolution was taken. The letter she has received to-day has shown her the announcement cannot be delayed; and yet here she is, leaning against the window-sill, as unwilling as ever to obtrude it upon his sunny path. The mother's voice within her is ever the most powerful, and insists on making itself heard. 'Not to-night! not to-night! let him have one day more!'

The worst of it was, she had not only to announce the unwelcome news, but to prepare him for an almost immediate parting with herself. On that intermediate separation, that impending parting, she could not dwell herself for a moment without a tightening at her throat, and a strange thrill at her heart. How, then, could she expect it of him?

He was to spend the time of her absence at his uncle's; but as Colonel Middleton and his family would not be settled in the country till after her marriage, Mervyn must be left under the vicar's charge for at

least a week or ten days, if the vicar would consent to the arrangement. But she had not yet consulted him on the subject, for she did not like Mervyn to be the last to hear of what concerned him so much the most nearly.

All this made it very necessary that Mervyn should be soon told, and Magdalen resolved that she would not put off the announcement later than the following day. The gong sounded as she came to this resolution, and with a start she remembered that she had not begun to dress.

Mervyn, meanwhile, all unconscious, was dressing himself for dinner with all his might. I say with all his might, for he had a way of getting engrossed heart and soul in the different details of his toilet, common to some boys of his age. For instance, washing his hands became, under the earnest attention he gave to it, a process for the manufacture of soap-suds, with which his basin was presently filled. Plunged up to elbows in the soft creamy mess, he enjoyed some delicious moments. As the soap-suds increased in size and beauty a bright idea seized him, and withdrawing his arms from the basin, he fetched from among a heap of treasures an old pipe, and forthwith began blowing soap-bubbles. The five-minutes bell startled him in the midst of his operations, and in a great flurry he brought them to a close. Next came his hair, which he brushed and combed with the utmost violence. Then he plastered it down with both hands, and advanced to the looking-glass to see the result.

To his dismay he found it was guiltless of a parting, and with a sigh he resigned himself to the necessity of making one. This was always a great undertaking, and he tried and tried again to make a straight one, but to no purpose. No one could have accused him of not taking pains about it, for he dug the comb into his head with an energy for which he suffered all the evening. At last something like a successful result was obtained, and after gazing at it in the glass for some minutes with great admiration, he proceeded to put on his jacket, and to pull off his boots. Just at this moment the gong sounded. Thereupon ensued a tremendous hunt for his shoes, his flurry augmented by the consternation into which the unexpected sound had thrown him. He looked under the bed, he groped on all fours under the sofa, he made himself quite flat and forced himself under the wardrobe; he looked in all the most possible and all the most impossible places, and finally discovered they had been at his side all the time. He sprang to his feet when they were on, and made for the door. Full tilt he came right against the water-jug, which he had inadvertently placed in the middle of the room, and down it went, its contents wildly rushing in every direction. Who does not know the feeling of utter hopelessness which attends such a calamity! First comes the horrible suspicion—for it is only a suspiciou at first—that foot or gown has caught the jug as one was hurrying along, mingled with the faint hope that it *may* rock back to its place, to catch the sound of which the expectant ear listens

eagerly. But no such sound comes; only a dull thud as the jug rolls over on the floor, and in a moment the stream is rushing in two or three different channels to all parts of the room. What a feeling of utter despair of ever being able to cope with such an accident! How hurriedly the question glances through the mind as to whether the sponges or the towels shall be sacrificed! Hasty recollections of the aspect of the sponges, after doing service on the last occasion of the kind, sweep through the mind, and produce an inward shrinking from subjecting them to a similar operation. But there is never time for thought. Whatever is to be done has to be done quickly, for while you are reflecting one stream is nearing a row of boots and slippers, while another is making stealthy advances to the gown you have just thrown off, which has accidentally slipped from the bed, and a third is seen creeping out under the door, with the obvious intention of taking a turn in the passage. If to add to your anxiety, the accident occurs in a friend's house, and you know that that friend is particular about his furniture, has lately carpeted his rooms, and perhaps occupies himself the rooms underneath, of which the ceiling has just been whitewashed, the situation is indeed terrible. I am not sure that in any case (speaking from the depths of a vast experience) instant flight is not the most satisfactory solution of the difficulty, leaving who may, or who will, to repair the mischief. At any rate, Mervyn came to that conclusion, after one hasty glance at the hurrying stream. And then he ran down the stairs, two steps at a time, and burst into

the drawing-room, with a confused account of the circumstances which had detained him, in which soap-suds and partings, shoes and water-jugs, were mixed in so vague a manner, that his mother would have been hopelessly bewildered, if she had been there. But, to Mervyn's surprise, he found he was speaking to the air, for the room was empty!

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKING THE NEWS.

BEFORE he had time to wonder at his mother's unusual unpunctuality, she came into the room behind him; and in his eagerness to begin his story all over again, he lost sight of it. He followed her into the dining-room, talking all the way, and they sat down to dinner. The long meditation upstairs had left its traces on Magdalen Lyndsay's calm sweet face, and she was rather silent and thoughtful. But she strove to shake it off, and to enter into what her boy was saying.

Having finished his story about the water-jug, he branched off to another subject.

'Mother, *you'll* come and look at the cricket-match, of *course*?'

'The cricket-match, dear; what cricket-match?'

'Why, *the* cricket-match, mother; the one I'm going to play in, you know—Married *v.* Single.'

'Oh! the village cricket-match. Yes; I had forgotten. Which side did you say you played on, dear?'

Mervyn's look of astonishment recalled her to herself,

and she laughed. Mervyn laughed too, though he felt a little injured that so important an event should not have taken more hold upon his mother's memory and attention.

'I beg your pardon, dear,' she said; 'I was not thinking of what I was saying.' And she laughed again.

'But mother, *do* think now,' he said eagerly, 'because it's *so* important. The vicar thinks I shall be a great addition to his side. (He plays on the Single, you know.) *Isn't* that pleasant to think of?' he added, earnestly.

If his mother did not quite enter into the delights of the position, at any rate she thought it pleasant to see the bright face and sparkling eyes with which the question was put.

'Yes, my darling,' she answered tenderly.

'And you'll come, won't you, mother dear? There'll be a nice little tent for you to sit in, quite away from the crowd; and then I'll come and talk to you between my turns. You'll like to see me get a lot of runs, won't you? Promise to come!'

'I shall certainly come if . . . . .' She broke off suddenly. 'If I am here,' she was going to say, but she stopped just in time.

'When is the match?' she concluded.

'To-morrow week is the Married *v.* Single, and a fortnight after Glen-Mervyn plays the village club. I am in both, so you can take your choice. But I think you had better come to both. There is nothing to prevent it, you know,' he added with a little laugh.

Nothing to prevent it! No! Nothing; except that by that time she would be Lord Wardlaw's wife, hundreds of miles away.

The thought smote upon her so sharply; it came so vividly before her that he would be playing his cricket-matches as usual, and that she would be far away. It brought the thought of parting so near, and the pain of it so clearly, that she hastily drank off a glass of water to hide the emotion she could not repress.

'Let us finish dinner quickly, darling,' she said hurriedly, 'and then we will go and sit in the garden. It is such a lovely night. In fact, I think I will leave you to finish alone, for I want to get out into the air.' And she rose from her chair as she spoke. Mervyn looked rather surprised at the suddenness of the arrangement.

'Why, mother! you have had no strawberries and cream, and I was going to make you such a nice mess.'

'I don't want any to-night, dear,' she answered rather faintly, as she gained the door; but by an irresistible impulse she returned to his side, and put her arms round his neck.

'God bless you, my darling! my darling!' she whispered, as she kissed him.

'I shan't be long, mother dear,' he said, warmly returning her caresses; and before the door had closed behind her, he was absorbed in his strawberry mess. He followed her in about ten minutes, and found her sitting outside the window in the twilight, on a low garden-chair. At her request he fetched her a white shawl, and after putting it over her shoulders, he sat

down on the grass by her side, put his head against her knees, and got possession of one of her hands.

'Now for a nice talk, mother.'

'What shall we talk about, darling?' she said. 'I think you must begin to-night. This lovely evening has set me dreaming, and I can think of nothing to say.'

'It is very beautiful, is'nt it?' said the boy, following his mother's gaze over lake and mountain, lit up by the silvery moon; but his child's mind only grasped the external beauty of the familiar landscape (admired and loved, because it was familiar), while her's had wandered off to dim imaginings of that internal beauty, of which all that is most lovely here is but the faint and imperfect expression—an attempt to render to our finite comprehension the grace and glory of that which is infinite and unseen.

'I love Glen-Mervyn so much, mother, don't you? There is no place like it in the world, I think.'

Mervyn's 'world' was rather limited, being confined to Glen-Mervyn and London. But his mother did not check the outpourings of his feelings by pointing this out.

'It is quite right, darling, that you should love your home, and I am glad you do. We have lived in it so many years now, you and I.'

'So many years,' repeated Mervyn, 'ever since I was born mother, haven't we—you and I.'

And he repeated the words 'you and I' with a sense of fond proud appropriation, while he tightened his grasp on his mother's hand.

'And I should like to go on living here for ever, mother,' he burst out again after a few minutes' silence; 'just you and I, only you and I.'

And he repeated 'you and I' in the same tone as before.

'You will talk differently in a few years, Mervyn,' she answered, with a laugh which was half a sigh.

'Never, mother,' he returned, with all the positive confidence of youth, which, feeling itself so warm and faithful, cannot grasp the idea of change.

'I should like everything to go on for ever as it is, with no alteration of any kind.'

'Oh, but that is impossible, my darling. In this world changes must come. Look how many occur every moment round you. The laws of our being and of nature proclaim that change must be. The child changes into man, the bud into the flower, and the blossom into the fruit. We should not desire it otherwise, of course, and there is nothing painful in it; but still it is so. The evening we are enjoying now is not the evening we were enjoying three hours ago. The evening has turned to twilight, and the twilight to night. The very bit of blue sky I found it so pleasant to rest my eyes on when we first came out, admiring its calm blank space, is now glittering with innumerable stars! Nothing seems to remain the same for a moment.'

'Yes, mother,' said Mervyn, restlessly, 'I know things change; but people, mother, and feelings, *they* don't change.'

Such a curious look passed over her face at his words. Three times she seemed about to speak with some excitement, but checked herself each time.

'You and I for instance, mother; *we* do not change.'

'And do you really think, Mervyn, that you are not changed, from the little tottering thing with long hair and blue shoes, that used to patter about on this terrace, and ride on Beth-Gelert's back. I pity Beth-Gelert, if you take to such horsemanship now,' she added, laughing.

Mervyn laughed too, though he was rather bored.

'I forgot,' he said.

He knew by experience what it was for his mother's sense of humour to be tickled; and it hurt his dignity to see he had made himself ridiculous.

'I beg your pardon, dear,' she said, still laughing; 'but the idea of your not having changed since you were a baby amused me so. But I promise to be very grave now.'

'Well, mother,' he said eagerly, returning to his point, 'it is only while one is growing that there are such great changes. Now *you*, at any rate, have not changed. I can't remember you the least different rom what you are now.'

'Even there, Mervyn, I cannot agree with you. You may not notice it, but I am by no means the girl I was when I first brought you, a baby, to Glen-Mervyn. Oh dear no!' she went on half to herself, as she leant back in her chair, and went off into a reverie, 'very different. In thought, in ideas, in everything. It would be strange,

indeed, if I were quite the same. I should not wish it, Mervyn. I should be sorry to think I were not changed.'

'Do you mean changed to look at, mother?'

'No. I was not thinking of appearance then,' she answered, 'so much as mind and feeling. For change in them, I hope, means improvement, progress; and in that sense I love change.'

'And I don't, mother,' said Mervyn, very decidedly; 'in every sense I hate changes, I think they are horrid.'

'You have not seen many,' she said, smiling.

'No more have you, have you, mother?'

Again the curious look came into her face, and her eyes shone with a look which was half sad, half agitated.

Mervyn noticed it this time: he drew near and kissed her, whispering, 'I forgot.'

For he thought she was thinking of his dead father.

She returned his caresses fondly, but she did not speak; and he meanwhile, with his hand locked in hers, was going through a certain train of thought, which always came upon him when the subject of that father was—which it was very rarely—mentioned between them. He hardly dared confess even to himself how much he disliked his mother having a past with which he had nothing to do, and how much he inwardly rejoiced that she was all his own, and that there was no father to come in between them. Even to her he had never hinted at this, and she had no idea of it. It was a curious part of the boy's affection that his greatest

pleasure in it was that sense of monopoly, that feeling of appropriation. It was the reflection that no one but himself had the right to her which made him so happy in her possession.

His mother's voice quite startled him when she spoke again.

'No, Mervyn,' she said, taking up the conversation from its starting-point: 'it is no use battling with the truth. Changes must be. We may fight against them, and stretch out our hands to beat them away and keep them back, crying that they shall not, must not come; but it is only the foolish beating of the caged bird against the bars, and quite as in vain as hopeless; for come they will, bringing with them joy or sorrow, as may be the will of Him who ordained and foresaw them from the first. And in the end we see it was best.'

'Mother!' said the boy, rather fearfully, 'don't! Why do you talk like this?'

'I had a letter to-day, Mervyn, from a very old friend; and it is the consideration of all the changes that have come on me since first we were friends together that has set me thinking so of change. When I was a young girl we saw much of each other. Then, his way in life lay in one road, mine in another, and so we parted. It may be that in those young days we two dreamed as little of changes being possible as you do now. And yet they came, Mervyn; yet they came! Thank God!' she added dreamily, 'there *is* a land where changes cannot come; but it is not here, Mervyn —not here!'

'But, mother,' urged the boy, 'why do you talk so? You frighten me; for you talk as if a change *were* coming. Why do you?'

'Because, my darling, a change *is* coming, and I want to prepare you for it. I had not meant to speak of it to-night; but as our talk has taken this turn, the way seems paved for me to tell you of that which is coming into our lives, and which I humbly trust will bring happiness to us both.'

'What is it, mother?' said Mervyn, in a very low voice.

'In the old days, dear, of which I have been speaking, I remember two old men, who had been friends from their earliest boyhood. The one was rich and unmarried; the other poor, a widower, with a grown-up daughter and a married son. They lived in London. The rich friend, out of his abundance, was always showering his gifts on the poor friend and his daughter. It was he who provided the horse she daily rode, and contributed to many other little enjoyments and comforts which her father would not have been able to afford for her. It was his interest that had procured the married son a commission in the Guards; and he it was who had introduced to him the woman he had married. He was a constant visitor at the house, always welcomed with delight by the father, and held in great esteem by the girl herself. Another constant visitor was a young man of the name of Charles Digby. He was the younger son of Lord Wardlaw, and was amusing himself in London previous to beginning his

diplomatic career. Both father and daughter enjoyed his society. His companionship had a great charm for the young girl, who had always been, more or less, as you are, Mervyn—a solitary child; and who had never known what it was to have a companion of her own age, her brother being so many years older than she. Suddenly his visits ceased; but before the girl had time to begin to wonder what had become of him her father announced to her his intention of going to the sea-side for change of air, and they almost immediately left town. The young girl missed her companion sorely, and felt a little hurt that he had not come to wish her good-bye; when, on questioning her father, she found Charlie Digby had obtained the appointment for which he had been waiting, and was now on his way to Madrid. However, the sudden and dangerous illness of her father put all other thoughts out of her head. He died; and the girl found herself, a few weeks after leaving London, alone, penniless, and dependent on her married brother with his large family. Pitying, no doubt, her friendless condition, her father's friend asked her whether she could bear the disparity of years between them, and become his wife. She consented, and for eighteen months he made her a kind and indulgent husband. Then he died. Meanwhile years rolled on. By the successive deaths of his father and brothers, Charlie Digby succeeded to the family honours, and returned to England. He met once more the friend of his youth; the old intimacy was renewed; the old delight in each other's society

revived, and he asked her to become his wife. . . . And now, Mervyn, have you any idea why I have told you this story?'

'No, mother,' answered the boy. 'It's awfully interesting; but I don't know why you have told it to me.'

'How tiresome of you, dear!' she said, laughing; but her smile died away as she thought she perceived a certain sort of anxiety in the boy's face which seemed to contradict his words.

'I have told it to you, darling, because all the people therein mentioned concern you very nearly. Think it over, bit by bit, before I tell you their names.'

She waited a minute, and then said, slowly and distinctly: 'The names of the two old men were William Middleton and—Mervyn Lyndsay; and the girl's name—Magdalen.'

. . . . . .

There was a long silence after Mrs. Lyndsay had spoken; and in the calm stillness of the summer evening Mervyn's quick breathing could be distinctly heard.

It may be that the old story had for a moment revived the old feelings in Magdalen's breast, for the next words were spoken dreamily—more to herself than to the boy.

'By the recollection of the long, long years of sepatation, he urged her not to refuse him; by his loneliness and exile in a foreign land, he prayed her to make him happy now, and—she consented.'

Mrs. Lyndsay paused again, but the silence was not

broken. Mervyn remained sitting where he was, with his head against her knees, and he neither spoke nor moved.

Mrs. Lyndsay, knowing his impetuous, excitable nature, marvelled to find him take the news so quietly. She wondered what was passing in his mind, and longed to take one look at his face; but in the position in which he was sitting it was hidden from her, and she felt it was better not to disturb him, or to force him to speak too soon.

She knew some time must be allowed for the shock of a piece of utterly unexpected intelligence, but she had not expected that Mervyn would be able to restrain for so long expression of some kind, accustomed as he was to pour forth to her at once all that was in his thoughts. For there was never restraint of any kind between them. His face was like a glass to her, in which every passing thought, however fleeting, was reflected. How well she knew the eager way in which his ideas came bubbling up from his lips, helter-skelter, anyhow, in his hurry to make her participate in them. She had expected an outburst, and had nerved herself to meet it; but this long delay she had not been prepared for, and she began to think he had more self-control than she had given him credit for.

She had revolved in her own mind for some time past all the stories she had heard and read of step-children and step-parents—stories telling of jars in family life, of petty jealousies, and ill-behaviour on both sides; stories, the recollection of which had made her shrink from the idea of such elements of discord in

her home; and the thought of which had made her dread more than anything else breaking the news to her boy, lest he should in his demeanour disclose a lurking in his breast of some such feelings. For there was in Magdalen Lyndsay's spirit a profound contempt of anything small and petty; and she had always so gloried in the grand broad lines of Mervyn's character —grand because simple, broad because so true and unselfish.

And now she began to think with pride and hope that he was not going to disappoint her; that he was above all these little feelings; that the frank, generous nature she had always so delighted in was coming to his help now, and that he would stand the test. Nay, more; that there was nothing selfish in his fond, proud appropriation of herself, but that in his loving devotion there were deeps which even she had not fathomed or suspected; and as she thought of it, her love and admiration deepened.

But she began to wish he would speak. This pent-up reserve was not natural to him, and at last she felt she *must* hear what his feelings were. So, laying her hand caressingly on his hair, she tried to turn his hidden face toward herself, saying, in a fond, low tone, in which all her love and all her admiration seemed to express itself:

'Speak to me, my darling.'

And then the burst came, with such passionate grief and despair, that she was appalled at his violence, and merely gazed at him, astonished.

'Mother! mother!' he exclaimed; and he started to

his feet, and wrung his hands; 'Oh! mother! mother! mother!'

Mrs. Lyndsay did not check him, or try to make him control himself, though she had never in his life seen him give way in this manner before. Turning her eyes from the face of the agitated boy to the calm star-lit sky above, she breathed a silent prayer for him and for herself, and then she waited to calm herself before speaking to him.

She needed calming, for she was startled and alarmed, disappointed too; yea, even—for she was but human—a little indignant. For there was in his manner as much of anger as of sorrow; as much, I had almost said, of *defiance* in his passionate cry of 'Mother, mother,' as of broken-hearted entreaty; as much of 'you *shall* not do this thing,' as of 'you *will* not, you *can* not, you surely do not mean to!'

And Magdalen was high-spirited as he; and for an instant her eyes had the self-same sparkle in them which was flashing from both of his. But only for a moment. It faded away directly, and gave place to a mournful, pitying light, which melted the boy at once, and caused him to throw himself at her knees, and exclaim in a less passionate, more despairing tone:

'Oh mother, say you do not mean it; say it is all a mistake.'

'I cannot say so, Mervyn.'

The low, sweet voice so dearly loved, thrilled through the boy, and woke up his love with greater force than ever; woke up, too, the feeling of blind resentment,

which her loving look had melted, and he ground his teeth together in his effort to keep back the torrent of words which rose to his lips, but which, in spite of himself, escaped almost before he was aware:

'You *shall* not do it! I won't have it! I hate him!

'Mervyn!'

Frightened into silence by the stern indignant tone, so unlike what he was accustomed to hear from his mother's lips, the boy stood, breathless, with the tears standing in his angry gleaming eyes.

Magdalen had risen as she spoke, and she now stood confronting him, pressing both her hands together, in her effort to keep back the angry feelings which were rising in her breast, while she told herself she was as bad as he if she allowed herself to be overcome by them.

Mother and son struggled together to overcome the same spirit which strove to master them, and which, in all their lives, till that moment, neither had ever brought to bear one against the other. And Magdalen was victorious. Her deep mother's love came to her help, and she resolved as she stood to put self on one side altogether, and by the might of that love to bear with him patiently.

Then she sat down, and drew the boy towards her; but, to her surprise, he resisted, and even shook her hand off his shoulder. She was deeply hurt. For the first time in his life he had failed in his loving respect for her. She had never been wounded through him before, and it cut her to the heart.

Was this the beginning of the end? she asked herself. Was the step she was about to take to entail for ever this sort of thing upon her? was all her past life of devotion to go for nothing? and was his love and veneration to give way at the first check? Back to the sunny past on which her thoughts had been so lately dwelling, they travelled before she could stop them; and it seemed so hard, so very hard. She might—she told herself, as they raced in hot haste through her brain, till her own side of the question came so vividly before her, that she had thought for nothing else—have hurled at the boy's head his father's unworthy conduct, and shown him how much more that other was the injured one than he. She might have told him of her blighted early life, separated from the lover of her youth, and married to the very man by whose means that separation had, unknown to herself, been effected. Her thoughts were in a whirl of agitation, and she felt there was nothing she might not with justice say. But Magdalen was a woman and a mother. She could not, and would not, disclose such things to a child, and that child her own son.

It was only for a moment that the thought of all these things overcame her; and then came to her help the habit which was with her a second nature, of lowering her thoughts to his level, and seeing things from his point of view. So she stamped out past recollections which might weaken her for the present, and looked out upon it all with her boy's eyes. And as she looked, she saw: and as she saw, she pitied; and as she pitied, she forgave.

And she drew him in spite of his resistance to her, and she laid his head on her breast, and tenderly she soothed and kissed him, till she conquered; for, worn out by the very force of his emotions, Mervyn was glad to forget everything but the pleasure of resting his throbbing head, and feeling her cool lips on his hot smarting eyelids.

There was a silence of some minutes, and then she said softly:

'My poor boy; I am so sorry to see you like this!'

The words were so gentle, and the voice so sorrowful, that a wild hope shot through Mervyn's breast. She who had never, as long as he could remember, failed to do away with, to the utmost of her power, anything that gave him sorrow, would she not now, that she saw she was making him miserable, give way to him, and make him happy.

'Mother, mother! *why* should it be?'

No answer; only soft kisses on his eyelids, and the caressing touch of her hand on his hair.

'Mother, darling! you have me; what else can you want?'

'What am I to say, my boy; what can I do to comfort you?'

'Give it up! Oh mother, give it up!'

'Poor boy, my own dear boy.'

The tender answers, so loving and yet so completely apart from his questions, pretending so little to be replies to them, fell mournfully on the boy's ear. He recognised in them intuitively the 'mind-made-up' tone, against

which there was no appeal; felt, that in his vain struggling and repining, he was but dashing himself against a rock—the rock of his mother's will; of her firm unalterable decision. And he felt, though he could not have described it, that it was bitter to hear loving words from the very source of his woe; and to know that there was neither the will nor the power there to alter what was to come to pass, even though he, whom she loved so well and would shield from all pain, desired so earnestly to avert it, that it seemed as if his very longing *must* keep it away; that what he dreaded so intensely was impossible, *could* not be; and there was in his heart that tumult which, had it taken shape in words, would have escaped in the passionate cry of the psalmist, 'If it had been an open enemy that had done me this dishonour, I could have borne it, but it was even *thou*.'

While he was thinking, Magdalen remained silent, only now and then passing her hand gently over his hair. When he seemed to be calm and quiet, she spoke again.

'Now, darling,' she said gently; 'let us talk it out. Ask yourself calmly what it is you dread so much in this. Perhaps we shall find you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill after all.'

A sound broke from Mervyn, savouring so strongly of anger, that Magdalen stopped speaking, and felt rather disheartened. But she was determined not to give it up, but to conquer by gentleness.

'I will bear with him to the end,' she murmured, 'so help me God!'

But she sighed as she said it, for she saw her boy was going to test to the utmost her love and forbearance.

Then, lowering herself once more to his level, she saw that in his present state of agitated feeling it would not do to treat his sorrow too lightly. She must try to feel it as he felt it, and to argue it out from his point of view.

If one method failed, she would try another; and if all were fruitless, she would appeal to his love for her.

'Mervyn, have you forgotten you are going to school after Christmas?'

A vehement shake of the head was his answer, as much as to say, 'How could I forget anything so disagreeable?'

'Have you ever thought it over, dear, at all?'

'Never, mother.'

'You have a wonderful power, Mervyn, of putting away from your thoughts anything you do not wish to think of, haven't you? It is a happy knack. But it is only a knack. I cannot give it a higher name. I have been thinking it is perhaps braver to look things firmly in the face, than to put them so entirely away. . . .' She looked at him a minute to see how far she might go, and added:

'Will you be brave, my darling, and face the future for a moment with me?'

But Mervyn's head went down again directly, and she saw him shrink into himself. *That* failed, but she would not be discouraged.

'Very well, darling,' she said; 'I will not ask you to do it if it pains you. Will you try, instead, to tell me *what* it is you dread so much in the idea of the future of which I have told you?'

A hundred ideas rushed through the boy's brain, but not one could he put into words. His breast heaved and his eyes moistened every time he attempted to speak. The future seemed so dark, and such a complication of miseries, that the very thought of it deprived him of voice wherewith to express one.

His mother saw how it was. 'Never mind, dear,' she said with a sigh, 'leave it for the present; we will talk of it some other time. That is to say, of your part in it. Now we will talk of mine.'

This was her last resource; an appeal to his feelings for her sake; and it succeeded directly; for it made Mervyn feel as if he had been selfish; and he drew closer to her, and listened with all his might.

'Let me go back to what I was saying. About your going to school. Well! I do not share your happy knack of putting that out of my head. It has been constantly present to me for many months past, and the thought of how dull and lonely I shall be without you has made me feel very sad. And it is only the beginning of the end, you know; only the beginning of the end.'

'How do you mean, mother?' asked the boy.

'Ah, Mervyn, I am braver than you, for I have faced the future and told myself that a month at Christmas, six weeks at Midsummer, and three weeks at Easter, is

all that I shall see of my boy—my sole and constant companion of so many years. I have gone further, and told myself that at the end of your school-life will come a profession, which, let it be what it may, will necessitate my seeing even less of you. That after that, you will come of age—when my power over you, nay, my very right to live in your home—ceases. That then will come another era in your life, and I must give you up, as many other mothers have done before me—to a younger, fairer, more dearly-loved one, who . . .'

But at this point, Mervyn broke in with such vehement declarations of the impossibility of his ever loving anyone half or a quarter as much as he did her, that she was obliged to stop, laughing.

'Oh, Mervyn, Mervyn, you will think differently some day! And I, for one, should be sorry to think you should have nothing better to love than such an old woman as I shall be by that time. But I know,' she added tenderly, 'it is impossible for the young to realise such things, so you must believe me, my boy, though you cannot understand it yourself. And you must try and see that, though I would not have it otherwise, the pondering on these things has made me feel that my life henceforth will not be so filled up and satisfying as it has hitherto been. And so . . .'

She broke off with a smile, and her eyes wandered away again to the silvery moon.

'And so? . . .' questioned Mervyn, 'so what, mother?'

'So God, in his great love and goodness, Mervyn, has

sent back to me the friend of my youth, to bring a new interest into the life that was going to be so lonely, and to be to me the companion and protector which you, my boy, cannot at a distance be. And you, Mervyn, if your love for me is as real and unselfish as I have always believed it to be, far from regretting, should rejoice that you do not leave me desolate and uncared for; should be grateful to this friend who will guard and cherish me in your absence and keep me happy till you can return to me again. What do you regret in it, Mervyn? Why should it make you sad?'

Why! Mervyn was unable to find an answer. He began to fear he had been very selfish, but had no word to say.

He was carried away by his mother's words, and by the rapt expression of her face, and he only put his head on her shoulder and said:

'I had no thought of all that.'

'No, darling, I know you had not, and that is why I thought I would put it before you. When the time for going to school was really here, it would have broken your heart to leave me alone, and to think of the solitary days and lonely evenings that I should have to spend. And now God has spared you that. We have both a great deal to be thankful for, Mervyn, I think. For your life, too, will be brighter for the change. The friend of my youth will in time be the friend of yours, and I know you will love him for my sake, till you learn to love him for his own. . . . Won't you *try* to love him, Mervyn, *for my sake?*'

The words were spoken in the lowest whisper, and her lips touched his forehead as they fell.

And Mervyn threw his arms round her, and exclaimed, 'I will! I will! Oh mother, indeed I will!'

That night, kneeling before the throne of God, Magdalen Lindsay poured forth her thankfulness that at least *one* work of her life should not have been in vain, and that the love and care of years should have received this palpable reward.

She had well nigh despaired several times during that long and stormy interview. Fear, respect, duty, the habit of obedience and deference to her will, the faith in her wisdom and judgment; by none of these usually powerful agents had the boy been anyway moved or swayed for a minute.

But love had been stronger than fear, stronger than habit, stronger than faith even. She had touched the right chord at last, and silenced at once all jars in his heart. Nothing else would have won him—nothing!

Her years of devotion had not been wasted, after all. The foundation of her power stood certain, being rooted in love. She did not fear the future now as she had feared it once or twice during their long conversation. She felt that she and her boy had faced the struggle of their lives, and that she had, by the power of love, been victorious. What had conquered him once would conquer him for ever.

And as she bowed her head in silent thankfulness, she understood, more clearly than she had ever done

before, the power of a religion which is founded and grafted on love. Nothing else would win us—nothing. Not fear, or duty, or habit; though they no doubt have their influence, and are helps as far as they go.

But we want something stronger, something deeper, something that takes a firmer hold upon us; something, in fact, that touches a chord in our hearts, and silences all the jars of rebellion there. And it is only love that can sound that chord; only the Love which has bought us the heaven which is but Its other name.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDDLETON FAMILY MOVE.

In the course of a week after their walk with their father, the little Middletons had it formally announced to them that their aunt Magdalen was going to be married to Lord Wardlaw in about a fortnight, and that their cousin Mervyn was coming to stay with them at Granton during his mother's absence abroad.

'Nina is certainly a most unsatisfactory child,' said Mrs. Middleton to her husband, when she returned to the drawing-room after making the announcement. 'She showed no interest, expressed no surprise. One would almost have thought from her manner that she knew all about it before.'

It is certainly wonderful how much it is the practice of children to put 'two and two together' of the scraps they hear, and so get at a whole. Their parents are, for the most part, as unaware of it as was Mrs. Middleton. Anyone with a good memory will be able to recall for himself how his suspicions, as a child, would be roused by the conversation broken off on his entrance, the sentence half finished, the warning look, or expressive cough. So that the next time the subject was mentioned,

his mind already sharpened, would be able to glean a bit more, before the grown-up people would remember his presence, and once more break off with an 'I forgot the child,' or 'another time.' And so on, till he knows a great deal, if not all, that was never intended for his ears. Grown-up people are so careless, and children are so sharp.

At any rate, one part of the announcement was a surprise to Nina, and that was that Mervyn should be coming to Granton. The thought filled her with pleasure, mingled with a fear lest he should not be happy among them in their home, where everything was so different from what he was accustomed to. She wondered how he would endure their dull school-room life, and submit to all the rules and regulations by which they were surrounded. One comfort was, their French governess always took her holiday in the months of August, September, and October. She went to Paris to study part of the time, and for the sake of that prospective advantage for her daughters Mrs. Middleton allowed her longer leave of absence than is the custom. She felt she returned more and more qualified, after every holiday, to make her pupils perfect French scholars. In the meantime they had an old French lady to superintend the school-room, who had been Mrs. Middleton's own governess once for a time. This lady, though in mortal terror of Mrs. Middleton, and a perfect slave to her rules, was not, in herself, a very rigid disciplinarian, and therefore Nina was glad that Mervyn's visit should be paid under her reign.

The children were to leave London in about a week; and their parents were to remain behind for the wedding; but Mervyn was not to come till the whole family were settled at Granton. Nina's thoughts were very busy all that day mapping out the future, and wondering if Mervyn would be happy. She was so abstracted during the walk in the afternoon, that Cecily could get nothing out of her, and was in despair at the small amount of interest Nina took in the 'How-*are*-yous' she pointed out to her, and even in the sudden appearance of the harum-scarum.

'I wish I was the statue of Achilles,' sighed Cecily, as they crossed the road at Grosvenor Gate, on their way to the Marble Arch.

'Why?' asked Nina, absently.

'He is always in the middle of the fun,' answered Cecily, 'instead of being in all the dull parts of the park like us. Just fancy what crowds of people are sitting on the chairs close to him now, and lines of carriages blocked right in front of him. Why, he can see the Queen or the Princess of Wales pass every day, twice; and it doesn't matter to him about the crowd, because he can see right over their heads. Should you like to be him, Nina; or would you rather be the statue of the Duke of Wellington?'

'Neither;' answered Nina, suddenly interested, and with a slight sparkle in her eye. 'I should like to be the policeman who stands by the Drive, and can keep back horses, and carts, and carriages, by just holding up his hand. It must be so pleasant to see the prancing

horses coming along as if nothing would stop them, and to know that you have the power, by just putting up two fingers, of forcing the grand coachman to pull them back on their haunches, whether he likes it or not.'

'How funny!' said Cecily; 'I shouldn't care a bit about that. And I don't think Mervyn would either.'

'How do you know what Mervyn would like?' asked Nina.

'I asked him one day,' answered Cecily, 'and he said he should like best to be the man who first thought of putting the water-troughs in Piccadilly, for all the poor thirsty horses to drink out of. He said he never got tired of standing there, and seeing them all crowding round.'

Nina did not talk any more after this. She was musing on the kindness of disposition that her cousin's wish demonstrated, and feeling that her own was a very poor one by comparison with his. She wondered why some people had so much nicer feelings than others, and whether she should be able, when Mervyn came to live with them, to find out how he managed to be so kind and nice.

She did not speak again till they were returning homewards round the park by Apsley House. As they approached Hyde Park Corner they saw a crowd assembled, as usual, waiting for the coming of the Queen or the Princess of Wales. A message reached them from Mademoiselle by Edmund, that they were to turn back, and go home a quieter way.

Cecily was in despair.

'Oh Nina! don't you think, for once, that Mademoiselle would let us stand here, and see them pass?'

'You can ask her,' said Nina; but she knew well enough what the answer would be.

'*You* ask her, Edmund,' said Cecily, eagerly.

The little boy ran back, but soon returned, hot and indignant.

'She says "Non, non,"' he exclaimed, 'and I heard her say to herself some one was a vulgar fool. And I think it was you, Nina.'

Both the little girls looked rather scared, and Nina rather sharply told Edmund not to tell stories. Mademoiselle then arrived on the spot, gesticulating with both hands, to enforce her horror at the idea of young ladies wishing to stand 'parmi une foule vulgaire.'

'There!' said Edmund, in a whisper to his sisters; 'I told you she had said it, and you wouldn't believe me.'

They were all made to turn, and go home across the park to Stanhope Gate.

Cecily was too ruffled by her disappointment to be conversational, and Nina returned to her musings. Indeed, her abstraction continued so great, that when they got out of the park she walked absently over the crossing into Park Lane, right under the jaws of a hansom cab, coming along at the rate of ten miles an hour. The bystanders shouted, Mademoiselle screamed, and the cabman, pulling back his horse with violence, called out angrily. Startled and disturbed in her day-dream by the noise, and forced to run against her will, Nina was anything but grateful for her escape.

'I'd almost rather be run over than halloed at,' she muttered to herself, as she arrived, hot and indignant, on the pavement.

The day for leaving London came at last; but how shall we attempt to give a description of a 'family start!' All the morning long Pickford's monster van blocked up the street, while the nurseries and school-room disgorged their contents into its open jaws. But not satisfied with that, four cabs were loaded with what was still remaining, or was wanted for more immediate use. A perambulator on one cab, an enormous bath on another, a rocking-horse on a third, besides boxes and packages innumerable.

Five children, two nurses, a governess, a school-room maid, a kitchen-maid, and a footman, composed the living freight. Every nurse carried a child, every child carried a toy, every other child carried a bird-cage. Every woman that did not carry a child had converted herself into a temporary hanging-stand, and from every part of her was suspended a loose parcel. Leather-bags containing the children's dinner, paper-bags containing biscuits for a bye-meal, parcels containing what no room had been found for in the big boxes, hung from her arms; while picture-books to amuse the younger ones in the train, and dozens of minor packages, occupied her hands.

Mrs. Middleton, who hated scenes of this kind, took leave of the party in the drawing-room, on its way down stairs; but Colonel Middleton, who was, as usual, out of a job, stationed himself at the hall-door to see the

children off. They came down in great excitement and delight, their eagerness to be off being not, alas! tempered by any regret at parting from their parents.

The cabs were soon filled, the orders given, and the long line filed round the corner into Park Lane on its way to the station.

Cecily found herself separated from Edmund, and was consequently very dull, for Nina was in one of her silent and thoughtful moods; but she consoled herself by chattering to Madame, who, being a new broom, was sure to sweep clean in Cecily's eyes.

They arrived at the station in good time, and were in their places a few moments before the train started. Nina took a place near the window. She liked dreamily to watch the fields and meadows as they flew past. It helped her to think; and she wanted to think over the marriage, and several things connected with it. Leaning back in her seat, with a book on her lap, she absently scanned the faces of her fellow-travellers, while she waited for the train to start. There was a lady opposite her, two gentlemen, and themselves; for the nursery-party travelled second-class. The newspaper-boy passed the carriage, and at sight of him, the lady suddenly rose, and as suddenly dashed her head violently against the window, which she had not perceived was shut. The surprise, combined with the blow, nearly knocked her down backwards; the window was smashed to atoms, and great excitement reigned for a minute in the carriage and on the platform. But the lady had escaped being cut by the glass, and she ex-

pressed herself unhurt, beyond being rather stunned by the violence of the blow in her face.

The accident had the effect of producing a head official of great importance, who, while congratulating the lady on having escaped without injury, hastened to reassure her by pointing out that she would be certain to feel the effects more hereafter. He proceeded to observe, with solemn hilarity, that he looked upon the misadventure as a great compliment to the railway-carriage. It was not often that the windows were clean enough to admit of such a mistake being made. He then bowed himself off, and the train proceeded on its way.

His remarks had left the lady in question in doubt as to the amount of disfigurement inflicted on her face; and she did not feel sufficiently intimate with any of her fellow-passengers (much as the accident had drawn them together for a few brief moments) to invite them to inspect her countenance. It seemed hard that she should be the only person to remain in ignorance of what concerned her so much the most nearly, but the fact remained, that she could not steal a glance at her own face, while all the others were at liberty to do so. She leant far back in her seat, to conceal herself from view, in nervous horror of being looked at, continually fancying she saw furtive and pitying glances directed at her, and wondering whether her nose was red, her eye black, or her forehead slowly developing a bump of many colours.

Nina, now and then, in the pauses of her intent concentration on the country outside, looked at her ab-

sently; and the poor lady absolutely writhed under the girl's unconscious gaze.

'It's the funniest book I ever read,' said Cecily, suddenly, from her end of the carriage. And she laughed merrily, as she shut it up.

The unfortunate lady only caught the last word, and the laugh that followed it.

'Red! did you say?' she said, starting and blushing all over, wondering and not daring to ask of what feature the child was speaking.

'Ayes and noes,' said the unconscious Cecily, reading the debates over Madame's shoulder; 'they *do* look funny: but it's more noes than ayes, I think.'

Cecily's grammar, combined with her sudden interest in politics, put the finishing touch to the poor lady's distress of mind. She raised her eyes with an appealing glance towards the child, and then saw, for the first time, that the little girl was not speaking to her. Realising the mistake she had made, and fearful of having betrayed herself, and of attracting the notice she sought to avoid, she shrank back into her seat, and never looked up again during the whole of the journey.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GATE AMONG THE OLD WELSH HILLS.

Mother and son never spoke together of the parting which was every day approaching nearer, though the thoughts of each were often busy with it, in a different way. To him it only came at times by fits and starts, forcing itself upon him, like a shadow coming across his sunny path. To her it was ever present. He, when the thought came upon him, drove it away, and would not allow it to take any definite shape. She allowed it to be a fact in her thoughts, and strove to render it familiar.

Sitting sometimes in the twilight, with her boy's head on her lap, and her fingers playing with his curly hair, she would muse upon his deep affection, and the unalloyed peace and enjoyment of their life together, till her hand would tremble and her eyes moisten, and she would feel as if she *could* not let him go.

On her own side, she could not but tell herself that it was a very serious step that she was taking; that she was going from a certain happiness—a happiness that she had tried and proved—into the unknown.

On his, though she knew that eventually all would be

for his own personal happiness, that the man who was to fill a father's place to him was of all men the one he would love and honour most, yet she felt there would be much for him to bear in the meanwhile.

It was not *that* future that she feared for him so much as that nearer one of the long months without her spent in the colder atmosphere of his cousins' home; the pain of the parting itself, which every hour brought nearer and nearer. The day came upon them all too quickly.

'Mervyn,' she said at breakfast, 'your uncle is to be here at seven. I think I will walk with you as far as the gate at half-past six, and then return to meet him alone.'

That was all that passed between them on the subject. All the day long she talked of his dog, his pony, and his arrangements, and of his life with his cousins.

'It won't be very long, my darling. Please God, in a few months, I shall be back again, and we will have such a happy winter here.' Mervyn felt his courage giving way; but his mother went on, without appearing to notice it.

'I have a fancy, Mervyn, that little Nina is not a very happy child, and as you will be thrown so much together, perhaps you may be able to help her. You ought to be fond of her, darling, for she is very like me.'

Mervyn's interest was immediately awakened.

'Yes, mother, she is a little; that is, her eyes and her hair are. But the great difference is that she looks so cross, and you . . .'

'What do I look?' smiled his mother, turning her soft eyes upon him.

Mervyn looked up, and met her glance with eyes of such worship and admiration, that her own filled with tears, which she forced back immediately.

'You know what I think, mother,' he answered, smiling.

Glad to see him smile, she went on. 'Will you try and find out what Nina is like, and write and tell me, for I am curious to know?'

'Yes,' he answered eagerly; and then he went on to speak of the other cousins, and to wonder if all the elder boys would be at home. And so they talked on quite cheerfully till half-past five, and then she said, 'We must go.'

They walked along, sometimes silent, sometimes conversing quietly, till they came to the gate. And there, among the wild Welsh mountains, in the glorious summer sunset, the mother and son parted; God having left them long enough together to fit them for the work He would have them do; and now having other paths for them to walk in, wherein to serve Him.

'God bless you, my darling, my darling, and have you in His safe keeping for ever!'

She thought she could have controlled herself, but she felt her courage going, and her voice shook and faltered as she spoke.

So she determined to cut the parting short, much as she longed to follow the impulse of her heart. For there had come into the mother's breast a longing for

which she could not account; a longing to clasp him to her, and to beg him to let her hear him say over and over again how he loved, how he worshipped her, how he *forgave* her even for seeming to desert him, and how nothing would, or could, alter his love and devotion. A longing, too, to thank him for all he had been to her these many years, and for the life he had made so bright; a longing to assure him that his place in her heart would for ever be kept for him, and that no new love could replace or weaken the old one. It seemed as if, in this crisis of her life, she needed his protecting love more than ever, and as if the very thought of it made it more precious just as she was sending it away. She felt, for the moment, a weak, helpless, woman, and craved for his young strength to lean upon, and the assurance of his unchanging love.

But she must forego the relief of giving all these feelings expression, lest he should weaken or fail. It must be no sad memory of his mother that he must carry with him during the long months of separation. Nothing on her side must make the parting a whit more painful to him. The quiver in her voice would betray her; she must not attempt to speak again. So she broke off suddenly; strained him to her, hiding her face on his shoulder; kissed his eyes, his lips, his hair; took his hands, and held them as if she *could* not let them go; gently disengaged herself from his clinging embrace, and stepped back into the wood, leaving him standing watching her disappear among its leafy paths,

turning round once that he might see her bright and smiling, waving him on, and kissing her hand.

Smiling and bright to the last. Such was the picture he carried with him, as he turned away, feeling quite brave and cheerful, and confident that she felt the same. He vaulted over the gate, and took his way to the Vicarage.

Something rushed past him as he walked, turned, and bounded upon him. 'Here, Beth-Gelert! here! Hallo, old fellow!' and Mervyn set off running, his thoughts diverted, child-like, by the sight of his favourite. And soon the echoes are ringing and laughing, as the dog and his young master betake themselves to their new abode.

And she, meanwhile, as soon as he is fairly gone, has returned to the gate, and is straining her eyes after the straw hat as it vanishes in the distance, feeling as if half the life in her was going with it. Leaning upon the topmost bar for support, she is watching the slight graceful figure with a yearning love and delight, half-longing, and half-fearing that he will turn round and let her see his bright young face once more.

But he pursues his way unconscious, and she realises at last that he is really gone.

Then, as the echoes bear back to her the ringing laugh and fresh young voice she loves so dearly, she stretches out her hands to the blank distance, and cries almost aloud, in accents of uncontrollable sorrow, 'Come back, Mervyn; come back, my darling; I cannot let you go.' . . . The old Welsh hills, who have so

often echoed the mingled laughter of mother and son, look down pityingly on the lonely mother, and their silence seems to tell her it is too late. . . .

So she turned and betook her to her desolate home; to the scenes whence his young presence has departed: through the deserted gardens and the silent drawing-room, up to the still old staircase to her own apartment, where she may give way to her grief undisturbed. Yet, though not looking to the right hand or to the left, she has been conscious of the cricket-bat on the lawn, the butterfly-net on the hall-table, the half-open door of the empty bed-room, and the chill at her heart is greater than ever when she reaches her chamber door.

Entering hastily, half-blinded by her tears, she throws herself on her knees by the bedside; and there, at last, she is mastered by the grief that has been fighting with her all day. For his sake she has kept it down, for his sake she has striven to be gay; that he might not be saddened by the remembrance of her grief. But now that his eye is no longer on her the strain is over, and her slight figure is shaken by the great sobs she cannot keep down.

'Oh my boy! my boy! How shall I live without you!'

So must it ever be. 'The parent's love for the child,' says a writer of the present century, 'must ever be greater than the child's love for the parent; not because the child is worthier, but because the parent's heart is larger.'

But what does it matter, would Magdalen have been

the first to say, since he and his dog are bounding happily over the hills, and since he has carried away in his heart a picture of her, bright and cheerful; smiling and gay to the last, waving him on, and kissing her hand!

CHAPTER X.

THE VICAR AND HIS MAIDEN SISTER.

In the prim little parlour of the Vicarage was seated its prim mistress, the vicar's maiden sister.

She was knitting by the window, and her brother, the Rev. Pendarvis Hughes, was sitting in an arm-chair reading the paper.

It was evident that both were expecting some one; for the sister looked up at every sound, and even the brother roused himself once or twice from his reading.

'You have got everything nice for him in his bed-room, Gwen?'

'Yes, everything, Pen; quite a picture: a nice little bit of scented soap, clean curtains, a beautiful ornament in the fireplace, which I made myself; and I have moved the case of stuffed birds from the library in there. I thought it would amuse him, poor little fellow. Don't you think so?

But the vicar had some time since become engrossed in his paper. Gwen looked rather wistfully at him, hoping he would speak again, but he said nothing more.

It was one of the great grievances of her life that he talked to her so little. He never told her anything, or

consulted her at all. She had to pump and pump if she wanted to get anything out of him. He never volunteered information, or if he did, he merely imparted it as a thing settled. He never talked things over with her; he just told her when he had made up his mind. He was a man much taken up with his books. To them all the time he could spare from his parish matters and his educational labours was given. He was a silent thoughtful man, and his sister's frivolous conversation and insipid remarks were the great trials of his life. Her little talk about parish matters, and her keen interest in the small amount of gossip she did manage to collect came, in his mind, under the head of 'women's cackle.' It wearied him sadly. He was kind to her, and patient, and thoughtful for her happiness and comfort, but he could not make her a companion.

Poor thing! she was entirely devoid of tact, and had a wonderful aptitude for saying the wrong thing. She loved and admired her brother, but was a little afraid of him. She looked upon him as a very superior being, and was quite aware of her own inferiority.

'He does not think much of women,' she would tell her friends, mysteriously. But there was one woman in the world in whom the rector believed implicitly, one in whom he saw no fault or flaw whatever; one, who in his eyes, possessed all womanly virtues without womanly weaknesses; and that was Magdalen Lyndsay.

Ever since she had been brought, years ago, to Glen-Mervyn, to be the companion of a man so many

years her senior, he had esteemed and admired her. He was the only person in the world who had really known anything of her married life, and without asking any questions he had guessed at her early history. That is, he had always been convinced that his patron, Mr. Lyndsay, had not been the object of her affections; and, realising this, he had admired more than he could say the way in which she had nobly striven to do her duty in the state of life to which God had called her. He knew that she had had a hard time of it during her husband's life-time; and he had always privately hoped that after his death Magdalen might form new ties, and be rewarded for her devotion. But as time went on, and there seemed no prospect of such an event, he ceased to expect it; and when at last it had come, it had taken him by surprise.

He had in the meantime grown so accustomed to have her there—the mainspring of the well-being of all around, and the ever ready seconder of all his plans for good—that the prospect had, at first, dismayed him. But he had got reconciled to it, more especially when he found that, from the fact of Lord Wardlaw's having no house on his estate in Ireland, she would still be able to live a great deal at Glen-Mervyn.

He had been much touched by the way she had, some years before, taken him into her confidence about her boy, and confided his education to his care. He had appreciated the unselfishness of the act, knowing what it had cost her. He had appreciated it even more after Mervyn had been his pupil for a few months. He

found the boy so intelligent and so eager over his work, that it was a pleasure to teach him. It was quite a new interest in the vicar's life, and he soon began to look forward to the arrival of the boy as to one of the greatest pleasures in the day. The contact with the fresh enquiring mind made him young again, and he grew to love the bright face and sunny smile as if the boy had been his own son.

When Mrs. Lyndsay imparted to him her intended marriage, and her difficulties about Mervyn, he willingly undertook to house him for as long as his mother wished, and ever since he was continually thinking what he could do to make him happy. He was a little nervous at the prospect, feeling deeply for the boy under his present circumstances, and knowing what a wrench the parting would be.

As he sat reading the paper that day his mind reverted to it over and over again, and the sentences he every now and then let fall showed of what his thoughts were full.

'Gwen,' he said again, 'is the cricket-match to-morrow?'

'Not till the next day,' she answered, eager to encourage the conversation; 'and how I know is, that as I was passing the green I saw no preparations for the tent; and I said to myself, How is this? for I thought, like you, that it was to-morrow. So I went into Mr. Jones' shop, and asked; and he told me it was not to-morrow: so that is how I know, Pen dear, do you see?'

'I am sorry for it,' said the vicar, and relapsed into silence again.

'Pen,' she said timidly.

He looked up.

'What time will dear little Mervyn come?'

'I cannot say.'

'Do you think he will ride or drive?'

'I cannot say.'

'Oh, but Pen, dear; didn't Mrs. Lyndsay tell you? Because of his luggage, you know.'

A pause.

'Pen.'

'What?'

'Do you think he will bring many boxes?'

'I really cannot say.'

'Will Mrs. Lyndsay bring him?'

'I should say probably not.'

Poor dear! think of her going to be a bride, and having a nice young husband. Will it be a grand wedding, Pen?'

Very wearily he answered, 'I do not know.'

'When does she go up to London, Pen, dear?'

'To-morrow.'

'Colonel Middleton comes to fetch her, doesn't he, Pen? I heard he was expected; isn't he? Pen, dear, I hear Lord Wardlaw is in Ireland, but goes to London to meet her in a few days. Does he?'

'I believe so.'

'Oh, Pen, dear! how I should like to go to the wedding! Shouldn't you?'

Discouraged by his silence, she stopped; but burst out again in a moment.

'Pen, there is a carriage going along the high road, one of the Glen carriages. Oh, it is Colonel Middleton! Yes! and he is going straight to the Glen. Oh, dear me! it is rather sad to think he has come to fetch dear Mrs. Lyndsay away. How we shall get on without her, I don't know! Do you, Pen?'

The newspaper went up a little, and no answer was given.

'The place will be quite in a stir to-morrow, Pen, won't it? There'll be the Glen carriages going and coming all day. I hear Mrs. Lyndsay is to be married in ten days, from Colonel Middleton's house in London, and then go abroad. Is that true, Pen?'

'I believe so.'

'Pen, dear, do you think little Mervyn will be sad when he arrives to-night?'

'I cannot say.'

Just then footsteps were heard outside, and the vicar and his sister rose simultaneously.

'Here he is!' exclaimed Gwen.

CHAPTER XI.

GWEN AND HER VICTIM.

Such was the family into which Mervyn's lot was to be cast till Colonel and Mrs. Middleton were ready to receive him at Granton.

It was not altogether a bad half-way house. The atmosphere into which he was to be translated at his uncle's was, as we know, such a very different one from that to which he was accustomed, that it was letting him down gradually, not plunging him into it at once. At the Vicarage, at any rate, he met with every care and attention that thoughtful consideration could devise. Gwen cared for all his creature comforts, and the vicar did all in his power to amuse and distract him, and make up to him for the loss of his mother's companionship. For the first few days Mervyn got on pretty well. It was quite natural to him to spend the greater part of his day there; he had done so for several years now, and it was not till five o'clock drew near—the hour when he was accustomed to scamper home to his mother—that the present state of affairs seemed to him at all strange.

But the thoughtful vicar, foreseeing this, was ever

ready with some plan of amusement and distraction, and to join in it himself, to the neglect of his own more important occupations. Mervyn was a little surprised to find what a sudden and violent fancy the vicar had taken to single wicket; so much so that he must needs begin the very moment five o'clock had struck, and continue playing till it was time to get ready for supper; and also at his newly awakened interest in distant views from certain distant mountains which necessitated their riding off the moment Mervyn had finished his studies, if they hoped to be back before dusk

Gwen was a little sore at the way her brother monopolised the boy. She had looked forward to getting out of him details of the wedding, of bridesmaids, trousseau, cake, favours, and other matters in which her heart delighted. And she literally had not, at the end of three days, had one single opportunity of a few minutes' private conversation with him. In the presence of her brother she dared not revert to such trivial subjects. Besides, whenever she alluded in the most distant manner to any of Mrs. Lyndsay's concerns, he had taken to give her glances before which she quailed.

On the fourth day of Mervyn's stay, he received his first letter from his mother. It was written from Colonel Middleton's house in London, and announced her safe arrival there. It did not contain much beyond expressions of her longing to hear from him, and to know all that he was doing.

It was given to him at breakfast, and he was conscious of Gwen's eyes being fixed on him greedily the whole time he was reading it.

The moment he had finished it, she said, eagerly, 'Well?'

'Quite well, thank you,' said Mervyn, mistaking her question.

'Yes, but what news, dear? What does she say about Lord Wardlaw?'

Mervyn blushed deeply, and answered shortly, 'Nothing.'

'Nothing!' exclaimed Gwen; 'nothing about the bridegroom! Are you quite sure?'

'Quite sure,' said Mervyn, moving restlessly in his chair.

'Some more tea, Gwen,' said the vicar's voice. 'Mervyn, would you not like to go and answer your mother's letter before we begin our work?'

Gladly Mervyn availed himself of the permission, and went off to the little study. There, sitting down on the rug in front of the fireplace, he kissed the letter over and over again, in a transport of love and delight.

'Mother! my own mother!' he murmured, looking with glowing eyes on the beloved hand-writing. 'Mine! my very own.' Then he kissed the paper again, kissed the 'my darling' with which the letter began, kissed the 'Magdalen Lyndsay' with which it ended; and jumping up hastily, sat down eagerly to the table, to write his answer. He almost felt as if his mother were by, and he were going to pour out his thoughts as usual. Three days' events to tell her of! Three days! It was actually as long as that since he had seen or spoken to her. So he took a large sheet of paper and began at

the very top, feeling as if he should never have room for all he had to say. But he soon found writing a very different thing to talking. The turning of the sentences, the spelling of the words, the time it took him, and the trouble it was—all this rather cramped the free expression of his feelings, and the vicar came in to say the postboy was going before he had written a page and a half. He was obliged to let it go as it was, and the whole transaction left on him a vague sense of disappointment. He had not thought it would have been so difficult to write to his mother. He had not said half he meant to say. He had not answered half her questions. He did not feel as if he had been talking to her at all. It depressed him, and made him sad all day. He could not shake off the feeling. He half thought of writing another letter, so as to send a good long one the next day; but as soon as his lessons were over, there came cricket, and then supper, and then draughts, and then bed. He woke the next morning feeling very miserable. He felt more forlorn and more cut off from his mother than he had done yet. He wondered how he could have been so happy hitherto! The life he was leading seemed to him flat, unbearable. He wondered how he could have put up with it for four days. The thought of his life at Glen-Mervyn with his mother came upon him with a sharp pang of contrast. He buried his head in his pillow and cried for the first time since he had left her. A longing to write to her came over him, and jumping out of bed, he dressed himself hurriedly, and ran down to the study. He wrote a letter there before

breakfast, and his feelings were relieved. Badly written, badly spelt, very blotted and rather incoherent, it yet conveyed to his mother all that she would most wish to hear.

Towards the end of the week he received the answer, telling him of the pleasure it had been to her.

Meanwhile, the wedding-day was approaching. His mother wrote to him two days before, timing her letter to reach him on the day, telling him that she was going to cross the same day and to travel on to Vienna viâ Amiens and Paris.

She told him that if he answered her letter the day he received it, she would find it waiting for her. The letter ended by saying Colonel Middleton would write to the vicar as soon as he and Mrs. Middleton were settled at Granton. Mervyn looked very grave after reading the letter, and ate his breakfast in silence.

'Mr. Hughes,' he said after a time, 'will you give me some foreign paper?'

'Yes, my boy. Why?'

'Mother wants to find a letter waiting from me in Paris,' he said, with an evident effort, 'and she says I must write it to-day.'

'Why, good gracious!' exclaimed Gwen, 'to day is the wedding-day!'

Before any answer could be made, the maid-servant came in to say a poor boy had called to beg the vicar to go without delay to his father, who was dying and wished to see him. Mr. Hughes rose directly.

'It is many miles away, Mervyn,' he said, 'so I can-

not be back till the afternoon. Amuse yourself as best you can. I am sorry to leave you, but it cannot be helped. You will find plenty of foreign paper in my desk.' And he hurried off.

The diversion was fortunate in one respect, but in another it was unlucky that the boy should, on his mother's wedding-day, be left exposed to the fire of Gwen's curiosity and questions. However, he was safe for a time, for the first thing was to write his foreign letter to his mother to catch the morning post. So he betook himself to the study, and Gwen went about her household avocations. The boy was in a curious state of mind, something like that in which he had been when his mother first broke the news to him. He was battling hard with himself, and trying to keep his feelings down. Still he managed to write her a very nice letter, folded it neatly, and addressed it, copying out the direction from hers. Letter in hand, he went to seek Gwen, to ask for a foreign stamp. He found her in the drawing-room, and preferred his request. Gwen was quite sure there was not such a thing in the house.

'Penny stamps would do,' said Mervyn, 'if I knew how many to put on.'

'Now was there ever such a piece of luck!' exclaimed Gwen. 'Your dear mother gave me a little gilt weighing-machine as a parting gift. She little thought the first use I should put it to would be to weigh your letter to her on her wedding-day!'

Mervyn winced. 'Where is it?' he said. 'On the writing-table?'

'Dear me, no!' said Gwen; 'do you think I would let such a gift as that lie about on the tables to get dusty? No, it is nicely wrapped up in its box, just as she gave it to me, upstairs in my drawer. Give me the letter, dear, and I'll go up and weigh it.'

Mervyn handed her the letter, and she got up from her chair. When she got to the door, she glanced at the direction, and then looked at Mervyn, with a twinkle in her eye. He felt irritated, without knowing why.

'What is the matter?' he said.

'You have not directed it right, dear,' she said with an arch smile, coming towards him.

'What's wrong?' he inquired, going up to her, and reading it over her shoulder.

'It's all right, Miss Hughes; it must be, for I copied the direction out of mother's letter, word for word:

Mrs. Lyndsay,
Hôtel du Louvre,
À Paris.

What can there be wrong about that?'

'Oh the direction is all right, dear, I dare say. It's the name!' And she pointed slyly to the 'Mrs. Lyndsay' and then to the clock. 'It is quite right now, dear, but it will be wrong in a very little while, for her name will be Lady Wardlaw. Think of that! And by the time your letter gets to Paris no one will know who Mrs. Lyndsay is, for there will be no such person in the world. Think of that! Doesn't it seem funny? To think of your making such a mistake! Well, it was a

very natural one, wasn't it? How it will make Pen laugh when I tell him. What a joke it will be at supper to-night! Well, you alter it, dear, while I run up to get the weighing-machine. What a joke, isn't it!' And with a little chuckle of delight, Gwen tripped out of the room.

Surely next to being devoid of feeling, there is nothing worse than being devoid of tact. Almost as much pain can be inflicted by the want of the one as by the want of the other. No refinement of cruelty could have done more than those few words of the unconscious Gwen's. The boy's feelings had been strung to the highest pitch; the embers that were smouldering in his heart needed only a very little gust of wind to fan them into a flame. He stood literally quivering under her speech, and when the door closed he gasped with the effort he made to control himself. For he felt there must be no display, no betrayal of himself. Gwen would be back again in a minute, and to save himself from her, to hope to escape from the still greater trial of her sympathy and condolences, he must at least appear unmoved.

It was a new lesson the poor child was learning—he who had never had occasion to hide his feelings before. But the contact with new characters necessitates the calling forth of new qualities; and he summoned up all the self-control he could muster, and was himself surprised to find he could command so much.

When Gwen returned with the weighing-machine,

chattering as she came along, she found him standing just where she had left him, and noticed nothing at all.

'I've been laughing all the way down stairs,' she said, 'to think of your letter lying in the Paris hotel, and no one knowing who it was for. Isn't it a nice little machine? See! you put the letter here, and the weights there. One, two, three, four, five—I declare, six stamps! Oh, Mervyn, fancy the wedding going on to-day! How lovely your dear mother will look in her bridal dress! And fancy the carriages and the smart dresses, and all the favours and cake! How I wish I could take a peep at it all! Don't you? I wonder what presents Lord Wardlaw has given his bride. Oh, don't go, Mervyn, stop and talk a bit longer.'

For poor Mervyn was trying, like a hunted hare, to escape from his tormentor. But Gwen had not done with him yet. She had at last got her victim into her clutches, and she was going to make the most of her opportunity. Question upon question, surmise upon surmise, she inflicted upon the boy; all, in fact, that the vicar had so strenuously endeavoured to guard him from, he had now to suffer.

But there are limits to human endurance, and Mervyn at length felt he could bear no more. Faltering some excuse about getting the stamps, he hastily snatched up his letter, and made for the door. Nor did he take any notice of the shrill little remonstrances that reached him as he left the room. His courage was all gone, his self-control had deserted him.

He hastily entered the little study, and locking the

door after him, tore the letter up into shreds, flung them furiously into the fireplace, and then buried his head in his hands, and cried as if his heart would break.

'By the time it gets to Paris no one will know who Mrs. Lyndsay is, for there will be no such person in the world!'

Over and over again the words rang in his head; he could not get away from them. No such person in the world! No Magdalen Lyndsay any more! She no longer shared his name! This last idea seemed to remove her further from him than any other thing. He had always been so proud that he and she were the only Lyndsays left, and that their very initials were the same.

How many old jokes and associations were connected with this last idea. How he had always delighted to seize upon her writing-paper, her smelling-bottle, her prayer-book, and to answer her remonstrances with the same old joke: 'It *must* be mine, if it has got my initials!' What fights he had had with his mother's maid from time immemorial, because he always would take her pocket-handkerchiefs, and triumphantly point to the mark as his justification. How fond he had been of writing in any book he gave her: 'M. Lyndsay, from M. Lyndsay.' And now it was all over! It was a little thing, no doubt; but to him, in his excited frame of mind, it seemed the key-note of the discord that was coming into his life.

'No such person in the world!' No Magdalen

Lyndsay! In fact, no mother! She was his no longer! Seas rolled between them. She shared no longer his home or his name. She was gone for ever: she was to him as dead! She might as well be lying in the little churchyard at Glen-Mervyn. Better! oh, far better! For then she would at least be near him, still belong to him; still bear upon her tombstone the old familiar name!

With eyes blinded by their tears, he drew from his pocket her letter received that morning, that he might gaze upon the name once more. But it was not there.

'Now and always my darling,' the letter ended, 'your own loving Mother.' And his feelings underwent a change. 'Now and always,' he sobbed; 'now and always.'

Oh yes! she was his mother still; his own, and no one else's. He read the letter through. He drank in the living love which breathed through every line of it, and the thought of the marble tombstone fled away. Under any name, and in any place, his own, his very own! 'Now and always! Now and always!'

Sudden contrition seized him for having so hastily destroyed the letter, as he read his mother's reiterated entreaties that she might find one waiting for her in Paris. He must write another directly, and he set about it at once.

It was a very different one from the last. It breathed out his feelings more, and was full of every sentiment of affection. He directed it to her in her new name boldly, without giving himself time to think, and was

sticking on the six stamps with great energy, when Gwen tapped at the door. Mervyn unlocked it, and confronted her bravely.

She had on her bonnet and shawl, and was in full talk.

'I came to see what you were about, so quiet and busy. I am going to do a little marketing in the village. Won't you come with me? It is a nice bright morning.'

'Yes,' said Mervyn, 'I will come; but I must just finish stamping my letter.'

'Letter!' exclaimed Gwen. 'Didn't you send it! Why, dear me! dear me! the post-boy has been gone nearly three-quarters of an hour!' . . . .

Five minutes more saw Mervyn rushing wildly towards the stables, and Gwen trotting as quick as she could after him, talking all the way. Her shrill little remonstrances and shriller assurances that it was no use trying to overtake the postboy fell on ears wilfully deaf and heedless.

The boy's mind was filled by only one thought. The letter *must* go. Somehow or other it must be managed. Arrived at the stable he began to saddle his pony himself; and had nearly finished before the panting Gwen came up to him.

'It's . . . no . . . use . . . dear . . . I'm . . . sure,' she said, in little gasps; 'he . . . must be nearly . . . there . . . by now.'

'He goes by the high road,' answered Mervyn, his mind intent on the straps and buckles. 'If I go across country, I must get up to him.'

Gwen reiterated her assurances that it would be of no avail, and that he would be sure just to miss the boy on the road.

'Then I will ride on to the town,' said Mervyn, impatiently.

Gwen immediately entered into a long-winded argument, of which the upshot was that his pony would never do it. A horse might, and it was most unfortunate that Pen should on that morning, of all mornings, have taken his horse, &c., &c., &c

'I know what I'll do,' interrupted Mervyn; 'I'll ride to Glen-Mervyn and send a man and horse from there. Of course! Why didn't I think of it before! Glen-Mervyn is all that distance nearer the town. Don't keep me, Miss Hughes; I am losing time.' And in a fever of impatience he jumped on his pony, and galloped away. His head was so full of the object he had in view, that it had room for no other thought, or his heart might have failed him a little as he neared the familiar surroundings of his now desolate home. He clattered into the stable-yard, and shouted for a groom at the top of his voice. A man instantly appeared at the door, testifying surprise and pleasure at the unexpected appearance of his young master.

'Look here!' said Mervyn, eagerly; 'this letter has missed the post. How can I get it to the town? It is a letter to mother, you see, George, and I don't know *what* I shall do if it doesn't go.' All the servants worshipped Mervyn and his mother, and were ready to work to the bone for either. The man entered at once

into the importance of the case, and saw no difficulties anywhere. The post did not leave the town for half an hour after the postboy's arrival, as the letters had to be sorted. A good horse would do it in an hour-and-a-half. There was just time to saddle a horse and start. Nothing could be easier.

'On then; do it at once,' said Mervyn. 'Take mother's horse; he is by far the quickest; and be off as soon as you can!' No sooner said than done. In a few minutes Mervyn had the satisfaction of seeing the man depart, with the precious letter in the pocket of his saddle. He breathed a long sigh of relief. 'She will get it,' he said half out loud. 'She won't have to ask for a letter in Paris, and find none. Oh how glad I am.' And the tears came into his eyes.

It was his surroundings as much as anything else that brought them there. All looked so much the same as usual that it was difficult to believe she was really gone.

'I will take a look at the house from the garden,' he said, 'and then I shall understand it better.'

'So, leaving his pony in the yard, he went round on to the terrace and stood in front of his empty, deserted home. Oh how lonely it looked! How solitary! The windows were all shut, the blinds were all down; there was silence and desolation over everything. His chest heaved as he gazed, and he turned his head away for a minute, as if he could not bear the sight. *Could* this be Glen-Mervyn, the happy, the beloved home of his childhood? Oh no! surely not! Not this dreary-

looking place! *Could* those be the lawns and gardens he had loved so well? He felt them to be hateful. They were unsightly and hideous in their emptiness. How could he have so deceived himself as to fancy Glen-Mervyn a cheerful home-like place! How *could* he have thought it fair? Why, it was loathsome, detestable! He wished himself far away, out of its very neighbourhood; to leave it all behind, and to get away from the very recollection of such dreariness and desolation. He hurried to the stables, mounted his pony, and galloped back to the Vicarage. Change of thought awaited him, happily, for the vicar had returned sooner than he had expected, and the afternoon was spent in study. But the recollection of that deserted home, so near, weighed upon his spirits, and he began to long to go to Granton.

He painted to himself the delights of the big house so full of young people; the Eton cousins, the big school-room party, the society of his uncle and his aunt. The little Vicarage with its prim drawing-room and its uneventful days; the want of youth and spirits about the vicar and his sister, began to weary and depress him, and his delight was great when at last the summons came.

The vicar was going to London on business, so they would travel thus far together, and then Mervyn would go on alone. The thoughts of the change were delightful.

So, one summer's evening, he bade a joyful good-bye to Gwen, and he and the vicar started on their journey,

catching the night mail on its way from Holyhead to London. They arrived in the early morning, and after a toilette and breakfast at the Euston Square Hotel, Mervyn was established by Mr. Hughes in the train, with plenty of books and papers to amuse him on the way. The vicar stood talking to him at the window of his carriage to the last, and then, when the train began to move, he regretfully said farewell, bidding God bless him and protect him, and restore him safely to his people and his home.

And so they parted: the boy rich in the illusions of youth, bright with hopes and anticipations; his thoughts full of the pleasures and enjoyments he felt so sure were awaiting him;—the old man with no illusions on his path to tell him otherwise than that his life would be the emptier for the loss of the boy's bright society.

CHAPTER XII.

MERVYN'S ARRIVAL AT GRANTON

It was about half-past six when Mervyn drove up to the door of Granton. He jumped out in eager excitement, half expecting to see his aunt and cousins assembled in the hall. But there was no one there, and he was ushered by the butler into an empty drawing-room and there left. He felt very much inclined to run out into the garden and call out all the names he could think of; but his intention was frustrated by the entrance of his aunt.

'Ah, Mervyn, here you are. How do you do? I hope you are quite well.'

Mervyn ran joyfully up to her and kissed her warmly. 'I am so glad to see you, Aunt Lydia.'

She then asked him a few questions about his journey, &c., what lesson-books he had brought, and how far advanced he was in this or that branch of learning.

Anyone but Mervyn would have felt a little chilled by her manner, but he was not given to observe those things; and besides, he was too much accustomed to love and sympathy to suppose that anyone would not give them to him. He put it down to her not being

quite well. So in the middle of one of her most pompous sentences on the subject of mathematics, he asked her earnestly if she had a headache, or was tired.

Mrs. Middleton looked surprised; but the idea having been put before her, she owned that she *was* a little tired.

'I only came down yesterday from London,' she said, 'and what with the wedding and altogether, I have been very hard worked there lately. Your uncle is still in town, but I expect him to-morrow. I think, perhaps, you had better come up to the school-room now. I daresay you will be glad of some tea.'

So saying, she rose, and Mervyn jumped up gladly, and followed her.

'The elder boys are gone abroad with a tutor for their holidays,' she said, as she led the way up many stairs and along many passages to the far-distant school-room. 'So you will have only Nina and Cecily. They have got an old French lady for their governess at present. You speak French, of course? I am sorry to say she is inclined to speak English too much, and the girls are only too glad to do the same. I hope you will set them a good example.'

So saying, she turned down a passage, where voices were at last heard; and throwing open a door, she entered, and said, 'Madame, I have brought my nephew. Mervyn, this is Madame.'

Sitting at tea at a round table were Nina, Cecily, and Edmund, and a very ugly old lady. Nina looked up when Mervyn entered, with an expression of pleasure; and Cecily jumped up, and would have run to meet him,

but seemed afraid to do so. She glanced timidly at her mother, and sat down again.

Mervyn ran up to Madame and shook hands, and then kissed his cousins one after another. 'It is a long time since I have seen you, isn't it?' he said. 'Nina has grown very tall, Aunt Lydia, hasn't she? and Edmund looks to me much bigger.'

'I hope you will all take example from Cousin Mervyn,' said Mrs. Middleton, without noticing his remarks. 'See how civilly he says "How do you do" to Madame.'

Madame looked uncomfortable; Mervyn felt rather shy; while Nina tossed back her hair and muttered something to herself about 'never having called him Cousin Mervyn in her life, and hardly knowing who her mamma meant.'

Luckily Mrs. Middleton did not notice it. She gathered up her rustling silk gown, and said, 'Well, now that I have made you all comfortable together, I will leave you. Madame, I have a good deal to do this evening, so I shall not want them down. Send Mervyn to bed early, as he has had a long journey.' And she swept out of the room. Mervyn had already engaged in conversation with Cecily, in whom he found a ready listener; so he did not notice his aunt's concluding remarks, otherwise he would certainly have rushed after her to wish her good-night.

'Will you take one cup of tea?' inquired Madame; 'Cecily, place your cousin one chair.'

'Oh, sit by me,' said little Edmund.

'No, by me, please,' said Cecily.

Mervyn good-naturedly placed himself between them; after which the children all looked at one another, and no one spoke. Mervyn was unaccustomed to the society of children, and didn't quite know what to say. Besides, he was very busy with his tea. He looked for some time at Nina, searching for the likeness of which his mother had spoken; but Nina had been ruffled by her mother's visit, and the expression of her face only confirmed him in his opinion of wherein the difference between them lay.

His thoughts wandered off to his mother's sweet face, though his eye still rested on Nina.

'How you stare!' said she at last; 'what makes you look at me?'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking about you,' he said, with a child's candour.

'What were you thinking of, Mervyn?' asked Cecily.

'Mother,' he answered; and as he spoke the tears came into his eyes. Nina's eyes softened, and she looked at him pityingly; but Mervyn had averted his, and did not observe the change. He did not talk much after this, but remained in a state of dreamy abstraction.

When the tea was cleared away, he asked Nina to show him his room. As they went along the passage he heard a soft droning noise, which, as they neared the apartment whence it proceeded, proved to be the following song:—

Why did they sell my Dinah
Upon my wedding-day?

'What is that, Nina?'

Nina turned round, and held up her finger.

'Hush!' she said; 'that is Totty being sung to sleep. Come very softly.' A little way on she opened a door, and saying, 'This is your room,' went away. He went in listlessly, but his face lighted up as he advanced towards the window.

For there, on the dressing-table, lay a letter from his mother; and with a shout of joy he sprang towards it, and eagerly devoured its contents. It was all that he could wish. She had found his letter waiting in Paris, and it had made her very happy. He felt more than repaid for all that letter had cost him, as he read and reread his mother's answer. He could not go back to the school-room again. He wanted to think it over, and enjoy it by himself. So he undressed, and got into bed.

He woke the next morning in high spirits, pleased at the idea of being at Granton, and inclined to be quite happy. He liked the large school-room party; it seemed cheerful and pleasant to him; and he was so merry at breakfast, that he made them all laugh. He won old Madame's heart at once by his attentions to her, and by constantly addressing his remarks to her. It struck him that his cousins did not include her in their conversation as much as they might.

As soon as breakfast was over, he proposed going out.

'Out!' said Cecily, with a groan. 'I wish we could. We've got to do lessons till half-past twelve!'

'What shall you do, Mervyn?' said Nina. 'I'm afraid you'll be rather dull.'

'What does Aunt Lydia do in the morning?' he asked.

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Nina, indifferently.

'Not know!' exclaimed Mervyn.

'She only came down the day before yesterday,' interrupted Cecily. 'In London she does all sorts of things. I can't remember about Granton.'

'She generally has lots of company to see after down here,' put in Nina, 'and she spends the day with them; but there's nobody come yet.'

'But why do you ask, Mervyn?' laughed Cecily; 'what can it matter to you?'

'Oh, only that I thought I would go and sit with her while you did your lessons. Perhaps she would come out for a little turn, and show me the place.'

Cecily looked very much astonished, and was going to speak, when Madame called her away to her lessons. Nina looked troubled. 'I almost advise you not, Mervyn; she might be . . . busy.'

She could not make up her mind whether it would be best to give him a hint of the state of affairs at Granton, or to let him find it out for himself.

'Oh, if she's busy,' he answered, 'I'll go out by myself, but I must just run down and see her. Good-bye for the present. I'll come back when I think you've done your lessons.' And he ran off whistling.

Nina looked very thoughtful after he was gone. She could not bear the thought of his being rebuffed, particularly on his first day at Granton. And yet she feared much that his reception could not but be very different

from that which he seemed to expect, and to what he had been accustomed.

She waited some time, listening rather anxiously for the sound of his returning footsteps. But he did not come. She was relieved about him at last, feeling that he must have found some other amusement, or else he would have come back to the school-room. She drew her little table near to the window, and began to write her French composition; but the least sound in the garden below made her jump up and look out, for she could not think what he could be about.

Meanwhile, Mervyn, not finding his aunt in the drawing-room, pursued his investigations further, and found her at last in a little morning-room, surrounded by account-books.

'Oh! *here* you are!' he exclaimed. 'Good morning, Aunt Lydia; I've had such a hunt for you. Isn't it a beautiful day?'

Mrs. Middleton was so surprised to see him, that she hardly knew what to say; and while she was hesitating he took a seat, and entered into conversation. Now Mrs. Middleton was a woman who was accustomed to live a great deal in society, and it was quite an event for her to spend the morning alone. She never dreamt of being at Granton without company, and the house was generally more or less full, from the time they arrived till they returned to London. It so happened that Colonel Middleton and a party of friends were not expected till that evening, and so she had found herself quite solitary with the whole day before her, and had

been a little dismayed at the prospect. So that Mervyn's entry was not so very inopportune as it might have been. At any rate, she did not feel inclined to send him away. She was attracted, too, by his frank, open manner, and not altogether callous to his good looks and pleasant expression of countenance. The room, which she had felt to be rather dull and silent just now, seemed to be brightened by his presence; and she presently found herself not only listening, but joining in the conversation, to the neglect of her business. He seemed so sure that she would be glad to see him, and took it so much as a matter of course that he should be there, that she began to look upon it in the same light herself.

'Ain't you rather dull, Aunt Lydia, all alone?'

Mrs. Middleton, on having the question pressed home to her, owned that she *was* a little dull.

'I suppose you are always a little dull while Nina and Cecily are at their lessons? Mother used to be while I was at the Vicarage. I was obliged to leave her then, you know. She didn't mind being alone if she had plenty to do, and she generally had that. But still she used to count the hours sometimes for my lessons to be over, and for me to come home. I dare say you often count the hours for Nina and Cecily's lessons to be over, don't you, Aunt Lydia?'

'They go out for their walk then,' answered Mrs. Middleton, rather evasively; 'and in the afternoon Nina rides with the coachman.'

'Don't you ride with her?' exclaimed Mervyn;

'Mother always rides with me. Oh, I forgot, of course she's so much younger than you. It's a pity though, isn't it? You and Nina might have some nice gallops. What are you going to do when you've finished your bills?'

'Nothing particular; but I shall never get on with them if you sit talking to me.'

'No, that you won't. Mother never can add if I am talking. So I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll run out in the garden, and come back when I think you've done.' And he went out by the window with a bound.

Somehow, Mrs. Middleton felt bored at his sudden departure, and was half inclined to call him back. The room felt duller and more silent than ever. She returned to her bills with reluctance. Presently, a voice at the window near the writing-table called out:

'Aunt Lydia, I've brought you a rose. Isn't it a beauty? Look!'

Mrs. Middleton looked up; and hardly knew whether she admired most the beauty of the yellow rose he was holding out, or that of his bright face above it, smiling down upon her. She accepted it very graciously.

'Do you know, Aunt Lydia, I almost advise you to come out for a little run. You can't think how delicious it is. We might have a nice walk together.'

Mrs. Middleton looked round the empty room, and then at the sunny garden.

'I've half a mind to come,' she said; 'it is dull after London, and I've nothing particular to do.'

'Oh yes, do,' said Mervyn; 'and I'll run up and fetch your things, if you like.'

Before she could answer, he was gone; and in ten minutes returned with all her walking-things on his arm in a heap.

'I've been rather long,' he said, as he threw them down on the nearest sofa; 'but I think I've got them at last. I don't believe I've forgotten anything. You see I didn't know where to find your things, so I've been having a tremendous hunt in your drawers and wardrobe, and that detained me. Mother's things are always put in one place, so that I can find them easily. I had to ring for your maid at last to help me. Shall I put on your coat?'

Mrs. Middleton found herself submitting to everything proposed, and in a few minutes she and Mervyn were walking in the garden, talking in a most friendly manner.

'I want to understand the place, you see, Aunt Lydia. I know Glen-Mervyn by heart, but all this is quite new. Now will you show me everything, please. First the flower-garden, then the kitchen-garden, then the glass; and we might finish up with the farm.'

Mrs. Middleton fancied she superintended everything connected with the farm and garden, but never had she so realised how very nominal that superintendence was, and how very little she really understood of the details of farming and gardening, till she took that walk with her young nephew. It was all she could do to satisfy his inquiries. The boy's knowledge and accuracy sur-

prised her, and every moment she feared exposing her ignorance. His interest in the subject, and acquaintance with matters of detail, seemed to her quite extraordinary, and instead of giving instruction, she found herself receiving it.

He had suggestions to make here and improvements to recommend there, and all his remarks were sensible and to the purpose. He seemed to know the name and history of every flower that blossomed, and of every shrub and tree that grew. It was just the same when they came to the farm and inspected the machinery; and he entered into conversation with the man who showed it to them with the ease of one who quite knew what he was talking about.

Mervyn presently asked to see a certain farming machine lately invented, which he seemed to take as a matter of course should be there. The man shook his head.

'We have not got one, sir.'

Mervyn expressed great surprise, and turned to his aunt. 'I wonder at that, Aunt Lydia!'

Now if there was one thing more than another on which Mrs. Middleton prided herself, it was on keeping up with the march of improvement, and being well up in the latest inventions. She answered quite in a tone of pique, 'That machine has only just appeared. I should hardly think anybody had got one yet.'

'Why, we've had it working at Glen-Mervyn nearly three weeks!' exclaimed Mervyn.

Altogether, Mrs. Middleton retraced her steps to the

house, feeling rather smaller, and also thinking a good deal more of her companion than she had done when she left it.

'You will make a capital landlord, Mervyn, some day,' she said almost involuntarily; 'who taught you all this?'

'Mother,' he answered simply; 'she says she always tries to teach me about all these sort of things, because she wants me to be a good landlord when I grow up.'

Mrs. Middleton did not say anything more after this. She was thinking of her own eldest boy, who, now nearly sixteen, thought of nothing but cricket and amusement, and had never taken interest in anything connected with the management of the estate. She felt quite certain he had not a tenth part of the knowledge possessed by the child at her side. She began to wonder whose fault it was. Governesses? Tutors? Whose? The boy himself, of course. An easy-going, indolent youth, with nothing in him. Evidently Mervyn was a superior kind of boy.

'I wonder why my boys are so stupid?' she asked herself.

And yet something in Mervyn's last speech grated rather uncomfortably on her ear.

'Mother says she always tries to teach me all these sort of things,' &c.

'I'm sure no boy of mine would ever have cared to hear about such things,' said one voice within her.

'Qui s'excuse, s'accuse,' said another.

'I can't remember,' said the first voice, 'ever to have

taken a walk with one of them, talking quietly and sensibly, in my life.'

'Did you ever ask one of them to come?' said the second.

'I never asked this boy, and yet he came. *My* boys would have thought it dull. Ah well, I suppose we can't have everything. My boys are manly, active creatures, and I suppose this boy is not. He is one of those quiet, thoughtful, dreamy . . . . Good gracious, Mervyn! What's the matter?'

For with a shout which rang through the air, the boy flung off his jacket, and bounded from her side towards an old beech-tree. Throwing his arms round the trunk he swung himself upwards and was soon lost to sight. Re-appearing nearly at the top, he looked down upon her astonished face with a merry laugh, and called out, 'It was a squirrel, Aunt Lydia, and I havn't caught him after all. Isn't it a pity?'

'So that excuse won't do,' said the second voice in Mrs. Middleton's breast, as she re-entered the house.

The whole proceeding had been watched by Nina from the school-room window with the greatest astonishment. First, at seeing her mother start for a walk with Mervyn, and to hear them chatting as they went along, as if on the most equal and friendly terms; then at the length of time which elapsed before their voices returning brought her to the window again; and last, though not least, at seeing Mervyn climb the tree, and look down upon Mrs. Middleton, laughing and shouting, evidently completely at his ease with her. She had watched her

mother anxiously, fearing Mervyn had gone too far, and that he would receive a rebuke. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw Mrs. Middleton nod and smile to the top of the tree, and then go in-doors without so much as a remonstrance.

The little daughter at the school-room window began to puzzle out the very problem the mother was working out in the drawing-room below. How was it? Why was this boy so different? Whose fault was it that others were not like him?

Curiously enough, they both came to the same conclusion. It was Mervyn himself. He was so charming, and of such an engaging disposition, that he gave and received love wherever he went. No one could resist him. He was unlike everyone else in the world.

And then the little daughter went on with her lessons, and the mother resumed her household bills.

'Done lessons?' said a merry voice, and a head peeped in at the school-room door.

Nina looked up with one of her rare smiles, and Madame, in the midst of her struggle with Cecily and French grammar, felt refreshed by the sight of anything so bright.

'Come in and take one chair,' she said.

'I've brought you a radish,' he said, advancing; 'you said you liked them at breakfast.'

The attention was more gratifying than the actual gift, for the radish was fresh from its bed of mould, and the hand that held it out was evidently the spade that

had dug it therefrom. Madame shrank a little, and Cecily was off in a fit of giggles directly.

'Oh, I forgot!' said Mervyn; 'it's not washed. I'll go and give it a rinse in my room.' Of course this operation took him a good deal longer than he intended; it proved so very engrossing.

When he returned to the school-room, he found lessons over, and his cousins gone out for their half-hour's air and exercise in the garden. He pursued Madame into her room, and presented his radish. He found her busy washing her brushes; and, his hand being in, he instantly volunteered to join her in so interesting an occupation. It was done with an amount of energy to which Madame's brushes were wholly unaccustomed. He then still further won the old lady's heart by perambulating the room, and asking a hundred and one questions as to the history of each individual whose photograph adorned Madame's walls. Their names, their circumstances, their habits and characters, were enquired into with an interest which did her good, and made her quite loquacious.

The luncheon-bell rang, and Nina came in, ready for luncheon.

'Please go and get ready, Mervyn,' she said; adding shyly, 'We are very punctual here, and mamma comes in directly the bell rings.'

'Oh well, you can explain it to her, you know; and I shan't be a minute.'

He certainly was not, for he reached the dining-room

door just as the school-room party was entering, and was in time to see a morning-greeting between his aunt and cousins.

'Why, Aunt Lydia!' he exclaimed, 'haven't you seen Nina and Cecily before?'

Mrs. Middleton answered rather hurriedly, 'No; I happen not to have been in the school-room to-day.'

Nina looked curiously at her mother for a minute, as if wondering what phase of feeling had caused her to make this evasive answer, since it was only about once in three weeks that Mrs. Middleton ever came into the school-room.

'Well, that *is* funny!' said Mervyn; '*we* have had a nice walk together, haven't we, Aunt Lydia? But I dare say Nina and Cecily will have their turn in the afternoon.'

Mrs. Middleton looked rather uncomfortable, and Nina blushed.

Mervyn went on: 'I think it must be so funny to have so many to be with, Aunt Lydia. You must find it so difficult to see each one much every day. Mother has only got me to be with; and you have got Nina, and Cecily, and Edmund, and Totty, and Baby. Oh! and Willie, and Rowley, and Cuthbert, when they are at home. Don't you find it rather difficult?'

Mrs. Middleton, in the pauses of carving, answered that a large family was, no doubt, inconvenient in more ways than one.

'What are we going to do this afternoon, all of us?' asked Mervyn presently.

'What would you like to do?' enquired Mrs. Middleton.

'Ride, I think,' he answered; 'my pony is here, you know. Will you ride with me, Nina?'

Nina, with her eyes fixed on her plate, murmured something unintelligible.

The difference between her manner and Mervyn's struck Mrs. Middleton forcibly, and she felt quite provoked with her.

'Why cannot you answer pleasantly?' she said, sharply, 'instead of looking as if your cousin had asked you to do some disagreeable thing. If I were Mervyn I should not wish to ride with anything so grumpy.'

Nina blushed till the tears came into her eyes. The fact was, there was nothing she wished so much as to ride with Mervyn; but she was so unaccustomed to any deviation from the usual rules, and so surprised at his free way of talking before her mother, and so afraid every moment he would be snubbed, that she had been struck dumb when he had pointedly addressed himself to her.

'I didn't know if I might, mamma,' she answered, in a low voice.

'And could you not ask me?' said Mrs. Middleton. 'Do you think Mervyn would hesitate to ask your Aunt Magdalen if he wanted leave for anything? Why cannot you do the same?'

'Please let her come, Aunt Lydia,' burst in Mervyn, much astonished and dismayed at the result of his

simple request. He turned his bright animated face to his aunt as he spoke.

'For your sake, Mervyn, I will say yes.'

The boy's gratitude and relief were great, and he thanked her warmly.

'But what will you do, Aunt Lydia? You will be all alone. Shan't you be dull?'

'I am going to drive to the station,' she answered, 'to meet some people who are coming.'

'Then I suppose I shan't see you again till I come back,' he said, as they all rose from the table; 'so good-bye till then.' And he ran up to her, and gave her a kiss.

Mrs. Middleton said nothing, and looked rather odd as she returned it. Whether she was annoyed or pleased, it was impossible to say. But when she returned to the drawing-room she sat down upon the sofa;—and thought.

Mervyn came down ten minutes after, ready for his ride, and found the ponies and coachman at the door, and Nina in her habit in the hall.

'Is he coming too?' he asked, indicating the coachman.

Nina nodded. Mervyn looked bored.

'You must lead the way,' he said, as they started, 'because you will know the prettiest road. I cannot think why the coachman comes. *I* could take care of you quite well.'

'He always rides with me,' said Nina.

'Does not Uncle Rowley ride with you?'

'No, never.'

'And Cecily?'

'Oh, Cecily's afraid. She won't even get on a donkey.'

'Isn't it rather dull riding alone with the coachman?'

'Yes, it is.'

'He looks rather cross.'

'So he is; very cross.'

'What does he talk about?'

'Oh, he never speaks.'

'Never speaks?'

'No.'

'Doesn't he answer when you speak to him?'

'I never speak to him. I am not allowed to. Mamma does not like it.'

'Dear, dear! Do you ride along like two mutes? How dreary dull it must be!'

'So it is. But it is better than walking with Madame and Cecily.'

'Mother and I have such delicious rides,' said the boy, after a pause. 'We laugh and talk all the way along, and . . . . oh, mother!' he exclaimed, half involuntarily, as the recollection came over him, and he turned his head away to hide the tears that rushed to his eyes.

Nina looked pityingly at his averted face, and longed to say something to comfort him.

Her feelings must have been expressed in her eyes? for when Mervyn met the glance, he exclaimed, 'You

are like mother, I declare. She said you were, and I said . . . . Oh, I forgot! I can't tell you what I said.'

'Oh, yes, do!'

'You would not like it, you know,' said Mervyn.

'I assure you I should not mind,' said Nina.

She was pleased and interested, and the face she turned to Mervyn was a very bright one.

'What a pity it is you don't always look like that! . . . . and then I should never have said it!'

'Well, but what did you say?' persisted Nina.

'Well, I said the difference was that you always looked cross, and she never did.'

Clearly Nina had not expected this answer, for she blushed crimson, and turned her head away.

'Ah, now you are offended!' said Mervyn. 'I told you you would not like it. Why did you make me say it?'

'No, I am not offended,' said Nina; but her voice was rather unsteady.

The fact was, the child was hurt and disappointed. She had been pleased at the idea of her aunt and cousin making her the subject of their conversation, and she did not like to think that they should have such an opinion of her.

She wondered if Mervyn's speech had made any difference in her aunt's feelings towards her. She longed to ask, but was too proud.

Finding Mervyn did not continue the conversation, she got desperate, and tried to bring it on again.

'What else?' she said, in the voice of a martyr. 'I would rather hear everything.'

'Oh, that was all!' he answered. 'Let us have a gallop.'

It was ten minutes or so before their ponies were walking again; and then Mervyn said, 'But it is a pity, isn't it?'

'What is a pity?'

'Why, that you always look so cross.

'I don't!' flashed out Nina.

'Oh, but you do, Nina. You can't tell, you know because you don't see yourself. I don't mean to say that you always do, but you do very often. Now at luncheon to-day, oh dear me! how cross you looked!'

'You don't understand,' said Nina, moving restlessly in her saddle. 'I wasn't cross, exactly. It wasn't quite that.'

'What then?' asked Mervyn.

Nina hesitated. She looked at Mervyn's open face, and felt she would never make him understand what reserve meant, nor be able to explain the complications of pride and sensitiveness.

'It is no use, Mervyn; you will never understand.'

'Well, but tell me one thing. Was it because you did not want to ride with me this afternoon?'

'Oh, no!' exclaimed Nina, eagerly.

'Wasn't it really? I am sure I couldn't make out whether you wanted to come or not. And I am certain Aunt Lydia didn't know.'

'I didn't want her to,' said Nina, in a low voice.

'Did not want her to?' exclaimed Mervyn, in unfeigned astonishment; 'why not?'

'I don't care for everybody to know what I like and dislike,' she answered.

'But why?' persisted Mervyn; 'what does it matter?'

Nina hesitated again. The expression of her ideas and feelings was a very unwonted thing with her, and she was dimly conscious that in expression they lost a good deal of their importance.

'It matters a great deal to me,' she answered; 'but you will never understand, Mervyn, so it is no use trying to explain.'

'I wish you *would* try, though,' said Mervyn. 'It seems to me such a trouble for nothing, to care so much what people say.'

'It's not so much what they *say*,' said Nina, 'as what they might *think*.'

'Think what?'

'Oh, all sorts of things.'

'What *does* it matter what people think?'

Nina had no answer to make to such a novel idea, and the cousins rode on in silence.

'Who do you love most in the whole world?' was Mervyn's next speech.

Nina was not at all prepared for such a question.

'Who do you?' she said hastily, to gain time.

'Mother, of course,' he answered. 'Who else should I love best? I only asked you because you have a father too, and I thought you might have a favourite between them.'

Perhaps at any other time Nina would have had more discrimination; but, being driven into a corner by her fear of Mervyn's pressing his first question, she spoke without reflection.

'You have got a father too, now,' she said. 'Lord Wardlaw is your father.'

The words were hardly out of her mouth, before she would have given worlds to recall them.

Mervyn's face flushed all over. He looked at her with an expression which quite frightened her, and then, giving his pony a cut with the whip, he galloped away.

Nina rode quietly after him, feeling very remorseful and her relief was great, when, at the turning of the road, she met him coming towards her, looking much as usual, though there were traces of tears about his eyes.

They did not recur to the subject, and soon reached home. By tea-time Mervyn had quite recovered himself, and Nina did her best to make up for having given him pain by being quite conversational and lively. After tea came lessons, and Mervyn strolled downstairs to look for his aunt. She was not in the drawing-room, so he rang the bell, and asked if she had come in. He was informed that some company had arrived, and that Mrs. Middleton had gone upstairs to show them to their rooms.

'Mrs. Middleton will be in her dressing-room, sir, I think,' the servant added.

Up to her dressing-room went Mervyn, three steps at a time, and knocked at the door.

'Come in,' said his aunt's voice.

'I've come to have a little talk,' said Mervyn, advancing into the room, and seating himself at the end of the sofa, on which Mrs. Middleton was lying. 'Are you tired, Aunt Lydia? Shall I fetch you some tea?'

Mrs. Middleton was surprised at her visitor, and still more so at the boldness with which he penetrated into her sanctum; but still she did not send him away.

'I have had some tea, thank you,' she said.

'You don't look very comfortable, Aunt Lydia. Your head is so low. Would you not like a pillow?'

Mrs. Middleton confessed it *might* be an advantage, and was surprised at the skilful way in which the boy arranged it under her head.

'Your tutor is coming to-morrow, Mervyn,' she said: 'so you will have plenty to do now. He will be here all the morning, and leave you work to occupy you in the afternoon, which you may do in the school-room if you promise not to disturb the girls. Then you will have from luncheon-time till half-past four for riding or walking, and then work till six o'clock tea. After that you are free. Of course, in the case of a game of cricket, or bad weather, you can reverse the order of your afternoon's work, and you may have a half-holiday on Saturday.'

'Oh! do you have much cricket here?' exclaimed Mervyn, eagerly.

'Who talks about cricket?' said a cheery voice; and a hand was laid on Mervyn's shoulder.

'Mervyn, my boy! I'm delighted to see you!'

And looking round, he saw Colonel Middleton.

'Uncle Rowley!' exclaimed the boy, springing up and kissing him; 'when did you come?'

'Just this moment,' answered Colonel Middleton; 'why, you are grown even since I saw you, Mervyn. He'll be a fine man, some of these days, Lydia!' he said, looking at his wife for admiration.

'So you are taking care of your aunt, are you? That's right. What's the matter, Lydia? Headache?'

'No,' she answered; 'I was only resting after my drive. The O'Briens have come, Rowley, and Mr. West. You had better run down and see them.'

'Shall I stay with you, or go with him?' said Mervyn.

Mrs. Middleton did not see the necessity for either course, and was about to advocate a return to the school-room, when Colonel Middleton answered for her.

'Yes, come along with me. Sir John is an old friend of your mother's.' And off they both went.

Mervyn wearied of Sir John and Mr. West after a time, and began to wonder what his cousins were about. He thought they could not know that their father had arrived, or they would surely have run down to see him. So he burst into the school-room with the news.

'Uncle Rowley's come.'

'Has he?' said Nina, indifferently.

She was sitting at the open window, reading a book, and Cecily was playing with her doll. Madame had gone into her room to dry her brushes.

'How dull you look,' said Mervyn; 'why don't you come down?'

'We don't go down till a quarter to eight ever,' said Cecily, 'and sometimes not then, when there is company here. Who's come, Mervyn?'

'The O'Briens, Sir John, and Mr. West,' answered Mervyn.

'All dullies,' said Cecily; 'we always call people we don't know "dullies." I hope they won't stay long. Where have you been, Mervyn?'

'Oh, I've been sitting with Aunt Lydia in her dressing-room.'

'Sitting with mamma in her dressing-room?' said Cecily; 'how very funny.'

'Why do you laugh?' said Mervyn; 'what makes you think it so funny?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Cecily; 'but it seems such a funny thing to do. Did she ask you to come?'

'No,' said Mervyn; 'it was only that I couldn't find her in the drawing-room, so I went up there and found her.'

'But what did you want her for?' persisted Cecily.

'Oh, I don't know; nothing very particular; only to have a talk with her.'

Cecily looked very surprised.

'A talk with her; how very odd! Fancy wanting to have a talk with mamma! What did you talk about? I'm sure *I* shouldn't know what to say.'

'I suppose that's because you're such a little girl,' said Mervyn, rather puzzled. 'Why, mother and I,

when I'm at home, sometimes talk together the whole afternoon. I dare say you will when you're older. Nina would find plenty to talk to Aunt Lydia about, I dare say; wouldn't you, Nina?'

Now Nina, though pretending to read, was listening intently to this conversation, and feeling very glad that it was Cecily, and not her, that was being questioned. She was by no means prepared to have it so suddenly turned upon her.

'Shouldn't I what?' she said.

'Have lots to say to Aunt Lydia,' he repeated; 'at least, if she wasn't too tired to talk? You know, Nina, I am afraid she is very tired to-day. She was lying down. Does she often lie on the sofa?'

'Yes—no—I don't know; I mean, I think she does,' stammered Nina.

In a general way she would have answered indifferently, but felt rather ashamed to do so before Mervyn.

'It isn't a headache, you know,' said Mervyn, 'because Uncle Rowley asked her, and she said she was only tired. Does she often have headaches Nina?'

Nina blushed and hesitated.

'I believe she does,' she said, confused.

'What do you generally do for her headaches?' was the next question.

Nina blushed again, and then wondered why she should.

'I know a capital thing that I always do for mother,' he went on, unheeding; 'it's a handkerchief dipped in

eau-de-cologne and water, and laid on the forehead. Mother's headaches always get cured by that. Did you ever try that?'

'No,' said Nina, in a low voice.

'What do you do, then?'

'Nothing,' said Nina, her truthfulness asserting itself over her feelings of shame.

'I'm afraid you're not a good nurse, Nina,' said Mervyn, looking fixedly at her.

Nina tried in vain to get away from Mervyn's searching eye.

'It's not my fault,' she said, half crying.

She quite longed to explain to Mervyn how it all was, and yet she felt it would be better for him to find it out his own way.

'You don't understand,' she said, restlessly.

Mervyn was seized with remorse at having made her unhappy, and embracing her warmly, begged her to talk of something else.

'What do you generally do at this time?' he said; 'let us have some fun!'

'What kind of fun?' said Nina, gently. She was touched at his thought for her, and his caresses.

'A regular romp,' he said.

'Oh, yes!' exclaimed Cecily, clapping her hands; 'and *may* I call Edmund? He does so like a romp.'

'I will fetch him,' said Mervyn, 'while you clear the room.'

'You must take a message from Madame, Mervyn,' said Nina, 'or else you won't get him.'

Madame's permission was soon obtained, and Mervyn ran up to the nursery, and delivered his message to Wilson, the head-nurse. She sent Edmund with the nursery-maid into a back room to be got ready, and Mervyn promised to wait for him. The baby was trotting about in a lace frock and red ribbons; and Totty, in a brown-holland pinafore, was sitting on the floor, with a picture-book in his lap.

'How smart the baby is,' said Mervyn.

'Yes, sir; she's to go down to see Lady Lucy O'Brien. I'm expecting her to be sent for every minute.'

Just then a bell rang.

'There it is. I must take her down.'

And Wilson carried the baby off, leaving Mervyn alone with Totty. The little fellow looked up, and seeing a stranger, seemed terrified.

'Don't be frightened, Totty,' said Mervyn; 'I'll take care of you.'

But the child was unused to strange faces, and he shrank back.

'Where's Nursey? I want her,' he said.

'She's coming back,' said Mervyn. 'Oh, don't cry, Totty.'

But Totty could not stand it. He was so very shy and nervous. Large tears gathered in his great mournful eyes.

Mervyn was much distressed, and did not know what to do.

'Oh, don't cry, little man,' he said. 'Look here!'

And he executed a somersault in the air to divert the child's attention. He succeeded, for Totty laughed in the midst of his tears.

'Again!' he said.

Mervyn did it again and again, and Totty laughed more merrily each time.

Mervyn was bounding about with his back to the door, so that he did not perceive that anyone had entered, till he saw a look of delight pass over Totty's face, and the child stretched out his arms and said, 'Nina!'

'I came to see what made you so long, Mervyn. How is it you are all alone with Totty?'

Mervyn explained.

Nina's face darkened when she heard the baby had been sent for.

'But wasn't Totty frightened to be left with you?' she asked.

Mervyn gave an account of his proceedings.

'He's so shy,' Nina said, apologetically; 'he sees so few people, and he's so delicate.'

'But Totty likes me now, don't you, Totty?' said Mervyn; 'you'll come to me now, won't you?' And he held out his arms.

But Totty didn't move, and Mervyn looked disappointed.

'Why won't he come, Nina?'

'He can't,' said Nina, in a low voice.

'Can't!' echoed Mervyn: 'do you mean he can't walk yet?'

Nina shook her head.

'Why, when I saw him in London, you said he would run very soon.'

'I thought so then, but . . . .'

'Why, Nina, is he so delicate as all that? Is he never going to be strong, like other boys?'

Nina couldn't trust herself to speak.

'Poor little fellow,' said Mervyn, in a whisper.

'You needn't pity him,' said Nina harshly, haunted as usual by the fear that Totty was being considered a black sheep; 'he's very happy.'

As if in confirmation of her assertion, little Totty looked up with a smile and said, 'Come and look at my pictures.'

'He likes you, Mervyn,' exclaimed Nina, surprised out of her reserve; 'he doesn't often speak to new people.'

Just then the nursery-maid came in with Edmund, who expressed himself ready to go down.

Poor little Totty's face clouded over. 'Not me go—no,' he said, shaking his head sorrowfully.

'Why shouldn't he come?' said Mervyn, lifting the child in his strong young arms; and before anyone could object, he had carried him out of the room. 'He'd like to see us romping and jumping. Wouldn't you, Totty?' he said, as they all went downstairs together.

'Me coming too!' was the little fellow's delighted answer, as he twined his arms confidingly round Mervyn's neck.

When they got into the school-room, Mervyn established him in a nice little corner, where he could see everything that went on; and then the game began.

Its nature was not very decided. It was called a romp, and a romp it certainly was. Cecily and Edmund joined in it with vigour; and Nina, though a little grand at first, was soon carried away by Mervyn's spirits and Totty's delight.

The confusion was at its height when the door opened, and Mrs. Middleton, dressed for dinner, appeared upon the scene, closely followed by her husband. She stopped short in her astonishment.

The school-room table was pushed up against the window, and the chairs were heaped upon it. Mervyn, with Edmund on his back, was racing wildly round the room, jumping over little heaps of books and maps, that were placed (evidently for the purpose) at measured intervals, in full pursuit after Cecily, who was darting about with inconceivable rapidity; while Nina blew a horn, and Totty clapped his hands from his corner.

'Good gracious!' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton, 'what is the meaning of this uproar?'

'We're hunting,' answered Mervyn, laughing and breathless; 'and we are having a capital run. Cecily's the fox. Tally ho! Yonder he goes! Why do you stop, Cecily? And Nina! go on blowing the horn.'

So saying, Mervyn, who was the only one who did not seem discomposed at Mrs. Middleton's entrance, bounded over a big heap of books, and catching his foot

in a loose one at the top, measured his length on the ground, rolling over Edmund as he fell.

'Bravo!' exclaimed his uncle, laughing; 'you took that fence well!'

'This will never do,' said Mrs. Middleton. 'Mervyn, you must remember your cousins are young ladies, and you must not teach them these rough games.'

'Oh! nonsense, Lydia!' said Colonel Middleton, 'what does it matter! It will do them all the good in the world. They're much too prim and old-fashioned. I never saw Nina look so animated, and look what a colour Cecily has got. Little Totty, too! See how he enjoys it!'

'Totty!' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton; 'how did Totty get here?'

'I brought him down, Aunt Lydia,' said Mervyn running up; 'he was so dull all alone in the nursery, and wanted to come.'

Happily for all parties, the dinner-bell rang at that moment, and Mrs. Middleton hurried away. Colonel Middleton remained behind a moment to wish them all good-night, and Mervyn and Cecily eagerly asked for leave to go on with the game. Colonel Middleton ran off laughing, declaring he would not be responsible; but he was not sorry to find his laugh had been taken for assent, when as he ran downstairs he heard the uproar recommence with greater force than ever; and Mervyn's ringing voice reached him as he crossed the hall: 'Tally ho! Yonder he goes!'

And so ended Mervyn's first day at Granton.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. MIDDLETON'S HEADACHE.

THE order of the next day was rather changed. Mervyn's tutor arrived at nine, and from that hour till nearly luncheon-time he was closeted with him in a little room looking out into the kitchen-garden.

There was comfort to come, however. His uncle informed him at luncheon that Mr. West was a cricketer, and that there was going to be a game in the field outside that afternoon, which Mervyn was welcome to join.

This was great news for the boy; and he ran up to his room directly, to put on his cricketing things and get his bat. He looked into the school-room on his way down, and found his cousins dressed for walking.

'Ain't you coming to watch the game?' he said.

'No,' said Cecily; 'we're going for a dull old walk on the high road. Isn't it a bore?'

'Oh, what a pity! Shall I ask Aunt Lydia to let you come and watch us, instead?'

'Oh, you can't go to mamma!' said Cecily, 'she's shut up in her room, ill.'

'Ill!' exclaimed Mervyn; 'was that why she wasn't

at luncheon? I was wondering where she was. What is the matter?'

'I don't know,' said Cecily.

'Not know; Nina, don't you know?'

'She has got a very bad headache, I believe,' said Nina.

'Has she?' he exclaimed; 'have you seen her, Nina?'

'No.'

'Ain't you going to her?'

'No.'

Mervyn looked curiously at Nina; but he was beginning to understand her a little; so he did not press the question, but remained standing in the middle of the room, swinging his bat round and round, and evidently turning something over in his mind.

'How nice you look in your white flannel and blue cap,' said Cecily, admiringly.

'Do I?' he said, absently. 'I know what I'll do,' he finished suddenly. 'I'll try my bandage dipped in eau-de-cologne and water; I am sure it will do her good.' And he ran out of the room, leaving his bat behind him.

Nina had an instinctive feeling that a struggle had been going on in her cousin's mind, and that it had been hard for him to give up his favourite game for his aunt's sake. She was filled with admiration for him, though she felt fearful as to how his sacrifice would be received.

Mrs. Middleton was prostrate with a headache on the

sofa, and had given orders that no one should disturb her; when, to her surprise, without knock or warning of any kind, her dressing-room door slowly opened, and somebody came in.

'Who is there? who is there?' she exclaimed; 'you can't come in.'

'Oh, it is only me,' said a clear young voice; and the tone was so confident, so completely that of one who merely meant to assert a perfect right, and was sure of a welcome, that Mrs. Middleton said nothing more, and only turned round to see who her visitor might be. To her astonishment she saw Mervyn, with a bottle of eau-de-cologne in one hand and a half-filled tumbler of water in the other, advancing quietly towards her.

'*You*, Mervyn! No, no. I can't have any children here now. I have got a very bad headache.'

'Oh, I won't let any of the children come in, I assure you,' said Mervyn, as he deposited his glass and bottle on a little table. 'I'll shut the door, and we shall be as quiet as possible.'

'But what do you want?' she exclaimed.

'Well, only a pocket-handkerchief now,' he answered. 'I got the water and the eau-de-cologne from Uncle Rowley's dressing-room; but his handkerchiefs did not do; they were not soft enough. Where do you keep yours? Oh, I see! in that drawer. Please don't move. Here are some nice ones, like mother's. I shall want two, you know. Is your head very bad?'

Taken by surprise, Mrs. Middleton answered 'Dreadful!' and, indeed, it was so bad just at that moment,

that she felt incapable of asking the boy any questions, or of making any further efforts to get rid of him.

She lay there, forgetful of his presence, till she was reminded of it by feeling a cold damp something laid gently across her throbbing temples. It felt like ice against her burning head, and, closing her eyes with a sense of keen pleasure in the sensation, she involuntarily exclaimed, 'How delicious!'

'I thought you'd like it,' said the boy, triumphantly; 'and as soon as this gets the least warm, I have got another ready. It is soaking in the glass now. You need not tell me when you are ready for it, because it will hurt you to talk. If you just move your hand, I shall understand.'

Too glad to avail herself of the permission, Mrs. Middleton lay still for some time, and then gave the required signal. Mervyn was watching for it, and instantly removed the handkerchief; but, before putting on a fresh one, he dabbed her forehead with the mixture, and then blew softly on it. The effect was so charming, that Mrs. Middleton found herself dreading every moment that he would leave off. But he seemed to know exactly how long to go on; and at the right moment he stopped, and put on the cold bandage again.

By degrees Mrs. Middleton felt the pain in her head lessen, and a delicious sense of drowsiness come over her. The glare of light in the room, which, when she first lay down, she had felt, even though her eyes were closed, got so subdued and pleasant, that she began to feel quite sleepy; and there was a monotonous droning

sound in the room for which she could not account, but which was very soothing and pleasant.

She was gradually dozing off, but was still conscious that at intervals the bandage on her head was changed, as soon as it grew at all too warm to be of use.

At last she remembered nothing more, till she woke some time after, free from pain and refreshed by her nap. Opening her eyes, she found that the room was carefully darkened, and that Mervyn was sitting at the window, reading a book by as much light as he could get; or, rather, not reading it, for it was lying in his lap, and he was peeping through the blinds out of the window, which looked on the cricket-field, and from whence rose every now and then merry shouts of 'Well caught!' 'Well bowled!' 'Run it out! Run it out!'

'Mervyn,' she said.

The boy turned his bright animated face from the window, where he was watching the game, and jumped up directly.

'*Are* you better, Aunt Lydia?' he asked, eagerly coming towards the sofa. 'You've had such a nice long sleep. Nearly an hour by my watch.'

'Yes, my dear boy,' she answered, taking his hand; 'thanks to you, I am quite well. Why, how did you learn to be such a good nurse and doctor? You are the best I ever met with.'

Mervyn's face shone with elation at these compliments, and he stood by her side, triumphant.

'I never remember getting rid of this kind of headache so quickly,' she continued. 'Indeed, I generally

have to wait for a night's rest to take it off. I should not have got to sleep-to day so easily, if the room had not been so nice and dark. By the way, how was that? I remember the blinds were all up when I first came in to lie down.'

'Oh, *I* darkened the room,' said Mervyn. 'I knew you would never get to sleep in that glaring light.'

'It was very kind of you,' she said, with more warmth than she usually expressed, 'and very thoughtful. You must have done it very quietly, too, for me not to have heard it. But I am afraid, my dear boy, you must have been very dull all this time in the dark. I hope you had an amusing book?'

'Well, not very,' he answered; 'but that did not matter. It was the only one I could find that I thought would amuse you. It was on the sofa, open, as if you had been reading it; so I went on from your place.'

'But I don't quite understand,' said Mrs. Middleton; 'you were not reading it to me, were you? . . . By the way, I did hear a droning monotonous noise as I went off. Could that have been you reading out loud?'

Mervyn went off into fits of laughter; and his aunt laughed, too, partly with him, and partly at his delight and amusement in what she had said.

'Why, that was me,' he said, 'reading you to sleep.'

'Reading me to sleep?'

'Yes! Mother says there is nothing like reading out loud for sending one to sleep, and I always do it to her. What did you think it was?'

'Well, I thought it was a humble-bee in the room, or

a blue-bottle. Then I fancied it might be the mowing-machine in the garden.'

Mervyn laughed more than ever at this. 'You see I read softer and softer, till at last I got almost to a whisper, and then I left off. If I had stopped suddenly, you would have woke up directly.'

'But what were you reading?'

'I don't quite know what it is,' he answered. 'It was the only book I could find. I looked on your table, but could only see "A Treatise on Hair-wash," and "A Hundred Ways to Cook a Rabbit." It is a big book, and rather dull.' So saying, he handed his aunt an enormous volume of 'Graham's Domestic Medicine.'

'Is *this* what you have been reading?' said his aunt, laughing.

'Yes,' he answered. 'I read from "Headache, distressing," to "Hydrophobia, causes of." When I got to that I left off, for I saw you had gone to sleep.'

'But were you not longing to play cricket all the time?'

The answer was painted on the boy's open face, but he only said, 'Oh, as long as I was reading I was too busy to think of it.'

'But when you left off?' persisted Mrs. Middleton.

'Well, yes—rather,' he replied.

'Then why did you not go? I mean, you had done all you could for me, and I was fast asleep.'

'Well, you see, Aunt Lydia, I've got some rather creaky boots on, and I was afraid of waking you if I walked across the room.'

Mrs. Middleton looked at him for a moment as if he had been some natural curiosity, and then said, 'Well, I won't detain you any longer, dear. Run out and have your game. Your uncle will be wondering what has become of you. I think I shall come out myself presently. I feel as if the fresh air would quite complete the cure you have begun.'

Mervyn jumped up eagerly and rushed off, giving the door such a bang as he went that it nearly brought back the headache he had taken such pains to drive away, and effectually convinced his aunt that quiet was anything but natural to him.

She lay on the sofa after he was gone, puzzling over him. If she could have put him down as a 'quiet boy,' or a 'drawing-room boy,' she would have been more able to account for his conduct of that afternoon. But with the bang of the door still in her ears, and the uproar in the school-room the night before fresh in her recollection, she was unable to put him down in the first category. That there were 'boys and boys' was one of Mrs. Middleton's pet theories. Manly, active, out-door boys on the one hand; thoughtful, sedentary, 'drawin-groom' boys on the other. What more likely than that Mervyn—an only child, living entirely with a grown-up person, without companions—should have become, even if it were not natural to him, accustomed to sit a great deal indoors, reading or otherwise amusing himself in a sedentary way. He could not really be fond of cricket, or he would never have been able to give up the game so readily, and amuse himself in her

room so long. As she thought over it, she went to the window, to pull up the blind. The first thing her eyes fell on was Mervyn's graceful figure in its white flannels, relieved by his blue cap. He was running full tilt after the ball, which had just been sent to the furthest end of the field, and snatching it up he hurled it with a tremendous swing at the distant wicket with so true an aim that the bails flew up in the air.

'Well done!' shouted his uncle. 'I thought we should never get that fellow out.'

The next batter sent the ball from the field into the garden; and Mrs. Middleton could not but admire the agility with which Mervyn climbed the haha, and swung himself on to the lawn. He had hardly got back to his place before a high ball came some way above his head. He gave a bound in the air, and caught out the new batter amid the applause of the rest. It was now his turn to go in, and Mrs. Middleton watched him getting run after run till she got tired of standing, and went back to the sofa.

She was more puzzled than ever. Of his fondness for the game there could be no doubt; of his manliness and activity there could be no question. Neither by nature, habit, nor inclination, was he a quiet sedentary boy. How, then, was his conduct to be accounted for? It had evidently been prompted solely by unselfishness and consideration for her. As manly and as active as her own elder boys, he was at the same time as thoughtful and as gentle as a woman. How was it that *her* children were not like this? she asked herself rather bitterly.

Not the boys, perhaps; that was hardly to be expected; but the girls? Nina, for instance, who was just Mervyn's age. How was it that she was so different?

'To be sure,' she said to herself, 'I am not often ill; but I cannot remember a single instance of Nina attempting to come near me at such times, or even inquiring how I was afterwards.'

How different this boy was! How much he had sought her out since his arrival. How pleased he seemed to be in her society. Nina was so cold, so selfish, so indifferent; Cecily, so silly and childish; the boys entirely taken up with themselves and their own amusements. Magdalen was certainly very lucky in her boy.

'There must be something wrong in my children's dispositions,' she said to herself again. 'A screw loose somewhere. I wonder what makes them so cold and selfish?'

So lay and pondered this woman, who with her own hand had put from her the affections and driven away the attentions that more loving mothers receive and encourage. She had missed, through her own fault, watchful care of little daughters, and the proud protecting affection of young sons. The tender solicitude, the thoughtful consideration, which other women meet with at the loving hands of their children, had never been hers. In her selfishness she had never done anything to promote or stimulate their love, and now she was hurt to find it did not exist. With the want of self-blame so conspicuous in her character, Mrs. Middleton did not in her meditation arrive at this view of the

matter, but continued to lay the blame on her children's natures. Dimly, indeed, for a moment, some such thoughts as the above came into her mind, as she contrasted the results of Magdalen's training with those of her own; but she thrust them away directly.

'Mervyn must be a curious boy,' she said to herself at last, as if to put such ideas more entirely out of her head; 'a very curious boy. Fancy a boy of his age sitting for nearly an hour in a dark room, and with a game he so delights in going on under his very eyes! I don't understand it at all.'

And then she rose from the sofa and rang for her maid to assist her in preparing for going out.

Nina and Cecily were just returning from their walk with Madame as Mrs. Middleton stepped out into the garden. At sight of her mother Nina stopped short and blushed crimson; then, seeming to recollect herself, she walked on with the rather defiant expression which she often put on to hide her shyness. The fact was, she was surprised to see her, and rather taken aback; for, struck by Mervyn's conduct, she had been forming a plan of trying to show her mother a little attention like him. All the way along she had been making up her mind that she would go to her room on her return, and ask how she was, and whether she could do anything for her.

She could not help feeling it was right to follow Mervyn's example, and show a little solicitude. But the proceeding was so novel, that she hardly knew if she should be able to manage it. It would look so odd,

she had told herself; her mother would be so surprised. Perhaps she might meet with a rebuff; and at the very thought her pride had risen.

How often she had rehearsed her project during the walk, in her own mind; how often she had first settled upon, and then rejected, different ways of carrying it out, would be incredible to any but such as she. Supposing she knocked at the door very softly, and there was no answer. What had she best do then? Would that mean her mother was asleep? She could, of course, run away very quickly, so that neither her mother nor anyone else should ever know she had knocked at the door, and not been answered. But then, supposing she met her father or the lady's-maid in the passage, and they were to ask her what she was doing there? Worse still, supposing, on hearing her knock, her mother should say, 'Who's there? You can't come in.' Flight would again be her only resource. But if her mother opened the door and saw her speeding along the passage, what was to be done then? Or, even if that did not happen, was there not a danger of her mother saying before all the others, 'Who was that came bothering at my door?' She *knew* she should blush; of course she would. She always did when she least wished to do so. And what explanation *could* she offer? She felt it would be impossible to own *why* she had knocked, *after* her mother had said 'Who was that came *bothering* at my door?' She must find some excuse, but what could it be? She could think of none. So she had told herself it was no use; she must give up her plan; and she had soothed

her conscience—which had pricked at the sight of Mervyn's conduct—by telling herself she was not to blame; it was somebody else's fault, though whose she could not exactly say. But it wouldn't do. Conscience had told her she had *not* done all she might in framing an excuse for going to her mother's room; and she had at last suddenly thought of gathering her a bouquet of wild flowers. Then if her mother called out, 'Who's there? What do you want?' or even if she said, 'You can't come in,' the answer was ready: 'It is me, and I've brought you some wild flowers.' Also she might add quickly, 'You needn't have them if you don't want them.' At any rate she would pick them, and then see how she felt.

Accordingly, she had gathered her bouquet, and was beginning to feel quite brave about her project; when, as we have seen, everything was upset by her meeting her mother in the garden, apparently quite well again. The revulsion of feeling was so abrupt that Nina quite started; and then, feeling shy and guilty, and almost as if her mother must guess what was passing in her mind, she hid her flowers behind her, and tried to slip into the house unobserved.

Fresh from the comparison between her own children and her nephew, Mrs. Middleton was more than usually alive to Nina's manner. She observed the action, too, and in her irritation turned sharply round upon her.

'Where are you going in such a hurry, and what have you got in your hand?'

Nina blushed crimson, and stammered out, 'Only some flowers.'

'Why do you hide them? And why do you get into such a temper because I ask you a simple question?'

Just at that moment Mervyn came bounding up, bat in hand, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

'Oh, Aunt Lydia! I'm so glad to see you out! How does your head feel now?'

'Yes, how is it?' stammered Nina, suddenly stricken with shame.

Mrs. Middleton looked at the two children as they stood before her, waiting for her answer. There was no mistaking which had made the inquiry from real interest, and which had, as it were, forced herself to make it.

Mrs. Middleton addressed herself pointedly to her nephew.

'Thank you, my dear boy, I am really quite well again. I don't want forced politeness, Nina,' she concluded, coldly; 'if you don't feel interest, pray do not oblige yourself to express it; and if you *do* feel it, you certainly are not happy in your manner of showing it. I wish you would learn to be as thoughtful and unselfish as Mervyn, and then there would be no need to put such a strain upon yourself. Your inquiries would then come naturally; but as it is, I believe you take interest in nobody and nothing.'

Nina could not stand it; she turned round and ran into the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

NINA AND MERVYN THROWN TOGETHER.

As time went on, Mervyn imperceptibly fell into the ways of the family into which he had been thrown.

He became, like his cousins, surrounded by rules and regulations, through which it was not easy to break. His tutor occupied him all the morning, and left him a good deal to prepare for the next day; so that he had only a few hours in the afternoon he could really call his own.

School-room tea was at six o'clock, and a message would come from head-quarters during that meal as to whether or no the children's presence would be required in the drawing-room for ten minutes before dinner. If so, then a toilette had to be gone through; and if not, they remained in the school-room till bed-time.

After the shooting season began, and the house was full of company, they were very seldom sent for.

The first time after Mervyn's arrival that the message came up that they would not be required, his astonishment was very great, and he could hardly believe he and his cousins would not really see his uncle and aunt again that evening, not even to wish them good-night. He

was bustling off to his aunt's dressing-room, to see if he could find her there, but Nina advised him not.

'You won't find her, Mervyn.'

'Why not? I did the first day.'

'That was quite a chance. When the house is full she always stays with the company till the dressing-bell rings.'

'Bother the company! I wish they'd go. When will they, Nina?'

'If these went, others would come, so it would be all the same. From the first of September the house is always full.'

'But, Nina! how *can* you go to bed without kissing Aunt Lydia and wishing her good-night?'

'If she doesn't care to say good-night to me, I don't care to say good-night to her.'

Little by little Mervyn began to see how matters stood. He observed how seldom Mrs. Middleton came into the school-room; how the children never went to her unless expressly sent for. He noticed the mother's demeanour to the children at luncheon, and the effect it had upon them. He saw that they were not at ease in her presence, and that it gave them no pleasure to be with her. He realised that Cecily was afraid of her, and that Nina was more reserved and silent than ever when her mother was present, only answering when pointedly addressed. They were glad to get away, and she was not the least desirous to keep them.

His mother had warned him that he must not expect to find his aunt and cousins on the same terms as herself

and him; but he had not expected to find such a difference as this. Between the mother and her interests and the children and theirs, he saw there was a great gulf fixed. She lived her life, and they lived theirs—parallel lines that never touched. He himself, accustomed to talk out everything with his mother, felt the want of having a grown-up person to speak to. Puzzled by what he saw around him, he longed for some one to explain it to him, or at least to help him to improve it.

Had he had many opportunities of being with his aunt, it would all have come out to her as naturally as possible; but he belonged to the school-room and its life, and he was 'shunted' like the rest. He saw his aunt at luncheon, and sometimes during the ten minutes before dinner, but alone—never. He made several attempts to see her, but she was always surrounded by company; and after one or two unsuccessful pilgrimages to the drawing-room, he had given it up.

And the effect it all had upon him was to depress him greatly. Sometimes the isolation of the school-room life weighed upon him terribly; the want of sympathy between the drawing-room and the school-room chilled him. He felt he was in a cold, loveless home; and as he contrasted it with the warmth and love of the home to which he had been accustomed, the loneliness of the atmosphere into which he had passed seemed almost more than he could bear.

Then the old longing for his mother would come across him, and he would break out into passionate lamentations at his separation from her. This would be

late in the evening, when the younger ones were gone to bed, and Madame was dozing in her arm-chair. Nina, sitting by, with her book, would observe the dejection of his attitude, and his averted face; and, judging by what she would prefer herself under the like circumstances, would pretend not to see.

But it was not so that this child of so much love had been accustomed to be treated. He was longing for the sympathy that had always been his, and her apparent indifference chilled him the more.

But there were wells of feeling hidden under Nina's calm little face, and her heart would swell with pity for him. If only she could give it expression! If only she could do something to comfort him!

Letting her book fall on her knees one night, she leant her head upon her hands, and gazed at him as he sat huddled up by the window with his face hidden; a whole world of pity in her dark eyes. Suddenly Mervyn looked up, and their eyes met.

Something in their expression must have told him all that the poor stiff little tongue could not say; for the boy rose up, and came and threw himself on the floor by her side.

'Kiss me, Nina,' the poor forlorn child exclaimed; 'nobody ever kisses me now; nobody has, since the evening mother went away.'

And Nina, moved with pity, put her arms round him, and kissed him again and again.

'She'll soon come back,' she whispered, soothingly.

'Say it again,' whispered the boy, clinging closer to her.

And Nina said it over and over again.

From that time they understood each other better; and Mervyn, secure of sympathy, felt less lonely. He understood that, cold and indifferent as Nina looked, she was not really so; and though he wondered why she was so different to others, and why her manner was so ungracious, yet he felt she was his friend, and he was comforted. He took to watching her, and the more he watched the more he was puzzled.

Mervyn was completely free from pride, and he could not understand it in another. Her shrinking sensitiveness he could not enter into; her reserve, too, was a constant astonishment to him. Often and often, in their long conversations out riding, or in the school-room before bed-time, he would stop short in his surprise and say, as he had said in their first one: 'Why, Nina, what *does* it matter? Why should not people know?'

'I shouldn't like people to know. They might *think*.'

'What *does* it matter what they think?'

Nina, on the other hand, could as little understand Mervyn's open fearlessness and unreserve. The way he spoke out everything he thought, without fear of anyone's opinion, was so surprising to her, as was also his demonstrative way of expressing his affection. She had, however, an inward admiration for it. She marvelled at it; but it attracted her all the same. Undemonstrative as she was herself, Mervyn's caressing ways did not displease her. She began rather to like

being kissed; and soon she would not for the world have gone to bed without Mervyn's affectionate farewell. But still, for a long time, she maintained her reserve on most points, leaving the talking to him. She was the listener, generally, in their long so-called conversations. It was his curious store of thoughts and fancies that came tumbling out as they rode along together. She was always intelligent and interested, but she seldom volunteered an idea of her own.

She learnt a good deal from him. His mind, from his constant intercourse with his mother, was so much better stored than Nina's. He had learnt a great deal in that way, which he would never have picked up otherwise. Sometimes he would repeat things his mother had said, and detail her opinions on various subjects. His conversation was discursive, but always attractive and original. Religion came in in its turn, which made Nina very shy. It was a subject on which she was more reserved, if possible, than on any other. She rather considered it one 'just for Sunday.' She kept it as a thing apart, and her own life flowed on without it. She did not mix it up at all with her everyday life, or bring it to bear on her difficulties and temptations. She considered herself, her stern upright self, with her strong sense of duty, quite sufficient for the overcoming of those difficulties and temptations.

Yet she *had* a religion of her own; and a very stern creed was hers. Truth at all hazards, uncompromising integrity and honesty, and a strict performance of religious duties. She would have thought it wrong not

to go to church twice on Sunday, and she would not have run on the Sabbath to save her life.

There was so much in the child that might have turned to good in better hands. What she wanted was softening; in other words, love. She judged all people by her own standard. Those who failed in the virtues she admired, were done for, in her eyes. The slightest deviation from truth, the smallest appearance of a want of moral courage and a desire to conceal, and the offender fell under her ban.

The little prevarications of society were hateful to her. Her mother's civilities to people she knew she did not care for, the little speeches she made savouring of falsehood, were all observed by Nina, and her mother judged accordingly.

The practice of saying 'Not at home' she thought positively wicked, and had long since made up her mind that, when she came out, she would give the footman private instructions to say 'Miss Middleton *is* at home, but does not feel inclined to see you.'

Nina's religion was as void of love as every other part of her; in fact, she reproduced her experience in her religion thus: God, like her mother, exacted such and such virtues, and required the performance of such and such duties; those who failed in them were punished hereafter. There was no more love for his creatures and wish for their happiness in God than she had been able to discover a love for herself and a wish for her happiness in her mother.

Now Mervyn's religion was altogether framed on a

different idea. His, too, had grown out of his experience and education. His efforts against his faults made his mother happy; they likewise were pleasing to God. He loved his mother, and tried to please her. He loved God, and tried to please Him. His mother loved him, and delighted to see him good and happy. God loved him, and delighted also. His religion was all love; Nina's all duty. Nina's might be called the Law, and Mervyn's the Gospel. In conversation these differences often appeared, particularly when, as time went on, Nina took to talking more herself, and revealing more of her own charater.

She had a good deal to bear from him in some ways. She had exalted some of her faults into virtues. Mervyn's fearless hand would demolish her idols, and show that he held as worthless what she deemed of value.

One evening, as they sat alone in the school-room, he suddenly said, 'I sometimes wish you were a little more truthful, Nina.'

'What do you mean?' said Nina, quickly.

'Well, I mean that I think, in a kind of a way, you tell a great many stories.'

'Mervyn!' she indignantly exclaimed; 'I never told a story in my life.'

Mervyn was not at all discomposed by this outburst.

'That depends,' he said, in his fearless way, 'on what you call a story. Mother says we may act stories, though we should be ashamed to tell them. I don't suppose you would say you had done something if you had; but you are always pretending you don't care

about things that you do care for, and all that sort of thing. It's no use your saying you don't, Nina,' he concluded—for a sound, as of contradiction reached him—'because I've watched you.'

The boy, in his honest simplicity, had hit a deeper truth than he had any idea of. For there is a form of pride—and poor little Nina's was of that form—which is an affectation before others of what does not exist in ourselves. There are those who scorn affectation or deceit of any kind, and plume themselves on being candid and true to the very backbone; who yet, under the influence of this kind of pride, will act falsehood they would never tell. But it carries no weight with it; it fails entirely in accomplishing its object, because nothing can be really strong but what is true; and this is false; unreal; a picture before others. 'You know, Nina,' continued the boy, 'I think you are the most extraordinary creature in the world; I do, really. You always pretend not to be fond of Totty, and I know you are as fond of him as you can be. Oh yes, you are,' he continued—disregarding again an imploring sound, in which a more experienced ear than his would have detected a most unmistakable sign of tears—'I know you are; and yet you want other people to think you're not; and if that isn't acting stories,' he concluded hotly, 'I don't know what is; and I'm sure it's very wicked.'

Poor Nina! Every one of Mervyn's bluff words had cut deep into her heart. Two or three times she had restrained herself, for she was ashamed of showing

her feelings on the other hand; and on the other, her proud little spirit rebelled against being found fault with; but when he ended with 'I'm sure it's very wicked,' she could not bear it. The long pent-up tears *would* come, and she burst into a violent fit of crying. 'Oh Mervyn, I *do* love Totty; I love him so *awfully*, that I can't bear to talk about it; and . . . and . . .'

But in a minute Mervyn's arms were round her, and he was asking her pardon over and over again for having made her unhappy, and promising he would never never mention the subject again.

Nina allowed herself to be caressed and comforted, and did not bear him any malice.

'I don't mind *you* knowing I love him, Mervyn, as long as you don't tell anyone else. Promise me you won't.' And Mervyn, with his arms still round her, promised eagerly. But the lesson took root all the same, and bore fruit in after times.

Another time, Mervyn had been explaining some pictures in a Scripture story-book to Edmund, one Sunday afternoon; and Nina, while reading her own book, had been every now and then attracted by what she heard him saying, and had tried to listen.

When the little boy had gone to bed, and the schoolroom was dark, and deserted by all but her cousin and herself, she came up to Mervyn, who was watching the glow-worms in the garden from the open window, and said, 'What was that you were telling Edmund this afternoon?'

Mervyn was heart and soul in the glow-worms, and

did not at first remember to what she was alluding; but after a few minutes' thought, he said, 'Oh you mean the Scripture picture-book. I was only explaining to him about Jesus Christ loving us. We were looking at a picture of Him blessing little children, and Edmund asked me why He did it.'

'And what did you say?' asked Nina, turning away her head.

'Oh, only just told him, you know.'

'Yes, but told him what?'

'Why, just what you would have told him yourself, if you had been explaining it to him.'

Now Nina did not much like showing Mervyn her ignorance, and yet the wish to hear what he *had* said was very strong.

'Well, but tell me just what you were telling him. I want to hear how you said it.'

'I told him it was because He loved them, and loved them so much that He died for their sake. Then Edmund asked me how much; and I said *even more* than our mothers love us. I didn't know how else to explain. But I couldn't say more than that, could I?' And the peculiar smile radiated his face, which always broke over it when he thought of his mother.

No answer from Nina.

'Mother says,' he went on, with glowing eyes, 'that God sends us mothers to show us how to love Him. We couldn't, she says, learn to love Him all at once, because it's so difficult. So He teaches us to love our

mothers first, and then by that we learn to love Him. So that makes it quite easy, doesn't it, Nina?'

'Yes—but—suppose,' said Nina, slowly; 'suppose we don't love our mother, how are we to learn then?'

'Oh, but then I never heard of such a thing as that, you know.'

A short silence ensued. It was broken by Nina.

'How can we love anyone we have never seen? *I* can't.'

'Oh, that is because you think to love anyone you must be always sitting with them, and kissing them. But mother says that is not the only kind of love.'

This was certainly more Mervyn's creed than Nina's; but she let it pass, because she wanted to hear what else he had to say.

'She says the real best way of showing love to anyone is to try and please them. Well, we can do that whether we have seen them or not. So when we try to please God, we *are* loving Him; don't you see? You do that, I suppose?'

'No,' she said, 'I don't think I do.'

'But you could if you liked?'

'No,' she repeated. 'I don't think I could.'

'Well, but Nina, you can understand trying to please your mother? Well, don't you see it is much the same? The things that please our mother please God too. The same things please both.'

A very curious expression passed over the girl's face at these words. She looked as if she could have said a

good deal if she chose; but, by an evident effort, she restrained herself, and only said, 'What sort of things?'

'Oh, all the right things, you know. Being obedient, and kind to everyone, and trying to help people who want help, keeping down our tempers, and not being put out when things go wrong—oh! you know them all, Nina, as well as I do. But what I mean is, that when we do all these things we *are* loving God, whether we know it or not, because we are trying to please Him, and to be like Him.'

'But, Mervyn,' she objected, 'nobody ever does all that. One reads in little story-books of people doing so, and in the Bible that our Saviour did it all; but *I* never saw anyone really like that.'

Mervyn looked at her in astonishment for a minute or two, and then said, 'Ah! that is because you don't know mother as I do.'

'Does she *always?*' asked Nina.

'*Always*,' he answered proudly. 'I never saw mother angry, or put out even, or anything that is wrong. She is always gentle, and kind, and patient, and loving to everybody. Oh mother!' he concluded, with quivering lips, as the image he had conjured up brought her vividly before him, 'there is no one like you in the whole wide world—no one!'

And Nina meanwhile was battling hard with herself, and trying to keep down a voice in her heart, which, try as she would, kept on ceaselessly saying, 'She is *never* gentle, or patient, or kind. She is loving to no

one. She thinks only of herself. I have seen her in a passion over and over again.'

'It's not my fault if I don't understand,' she said, half out loud.

'What is not?' asked Mervyn.

'Oh, nothing,' she answered, alarmed.

'When I was quite a little boy,' said Mervyn, laughing, 'I used to tell mother I was quite sure Jesus Christ was not a bit better than her; or, at least, that she was quite as good as Him. She used to say, 'Oh, hush!' she couldn't bear me to say it. There was a picture of Him in a book, and underneath was written, "He went about doing good." I used to say it was an exact description of her. She always stopped me; but it was true all the same. Then when she wanted me to grow like Him, I used to say, I would rather grow like her. The fact was, it was much the same.'

'And did you?' asked Nina.

'Oh no,' said Mervyn; 'I never could manage to grow like either. I never do anything I ought.'

'Yes, you do,' said Nina, eagerly. 'You are always kind and loving to everyone. I can't think how you manage it, but you *are*. Oh, Mervyn! I wish I was like you.'

'Like *me*, Nina?' said the boy, and he blushed scarlet. 'Oh, if you only knew! I am not a bit unselfish, or patient, or anything that is good.'

'Well, but you are better than me,' said Nina, restlessly. 'I don't believe I try, even. It is so difficult, Mervyn.'

'Yes, it is awfully difficult. My particular things seem so difficult. But then mother says, everybody thinks it is their own particular things that are so difficult; so she says that is no excuse at all.'

'What are your particular things, Mervyn?'

'Mother knows,' he answered, blushing deeply. 'Tell me yours,' he added hastily, to change the conversation.

Nina glanced with curiosity at him, noticing the reserve that had suddenly crept over him. She wondered whether in this character, outwardly so fair, there was a hidden and unsuspected flaw. She felt she had not got to the bottom of Mervyn quite, and wondered if she ever should. Only He, unto whom all hearts are open, knew what that flaw was. Circumstances were to develop it hereafter; and God held the instrument in His hand.

'I think I know what yours are, Nina.'

'Tell me,' said Nina; 'no, don't! Oh yes, do! At least begin, and I'll stop you if I don't like it.'

'Oh, well,' said Mervyn, 'I don't mean that you never do try; but I know how you might, if you liked. First of all, you might talk to poor old Madame a little more, and be a *leetle* kinder to Cecily and Edmund. Then you might smile when Aunt Lydia speaks to you at luncheon; and not try to hide from everybody how you love Totty, and . . . .'

'Oh, Mervyn,' she exclaimed, 'those are just the impossible things.'

'Just what I said once to mother about mine!'

'And what did she say?'

'She taught me this verse: "The things that are impossible with men . . ."'

'There!' said Nina, triumphantly, 'the Bible says they are impossible too.'

'But wait,' said Mervyn; 'I hadn't finished. You shouldn't interrupt me in the middle; "are possible with God." That means He'll help, and make them possible. I can't explain like mother, Nina; but if you try, you'll see. Now let's come and look at the glow-worms.'

Nina sighed deeply; but even as she sighed, the idea of a Strength outside herself entered for the first time into her mind.

'Wait one minute, Mervyn,' she said; 'I want to ask you one thing.'

'Well, what?' said the boy, rather reluctantly turning back from the open window.

'How do you manage to be so kind and nice to everyone? You can't care for them all?'

'Oh yes, I do. I care for them everyone.'

'What Cecily and Edmund, and mamma, and Madame, and all?'

'Oh yes; each one in a different way.'

'When you ask Madame how her rheumatism is, is it to please her, or because you think you ought?'

'Oh, I really want to know.'

'But why?'

'Poor old thing! I like her; and I am sorry to think she should be in pain.'

'Oh well, it must be very nice to love everyone, and

must make it much easier. I am sure it is easier for you than for me. I *can't* like people, somehow. I can't see anything to like in them, or any reason why I *should* like them.'

'Mother says if we really loved God, we should love everybody else because He does. Now you think of the person you love best in the whole world, and that will show you how easy it would be. You needn't tell me who you think of.'

Away flew Nina's thoughts to a little bed up-stairs, where her baby brother lay sleeping. And as her heart swelled at the thought of him, it told her how gladly she would do anything in the world for him; how willingly she would sacrifice herself to please him; and how anyone that he loved would gain her affections immediately. And so, through her love for her little brother, there stole into the wayward little heart a faint glimmer of the power of that higher love which worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.

'I see, Mervyn,' she said, after a few minutes; 'and now I am ready to look at the glow-worms.'

. . . . . .

Mervyn's influence gradually told upon Nina. Imperceptibly she softened, and came out of her reserve. This, in its turn, acted upon him. As he found in her more and more of a sympathetic companion, he grew happier and more reconciled to his life. They became the most inseparable of companions. Mervyn came to her with everything. His mother's letters were shared with her; his hopes for their future re-union were

poured into her ear. Her sympathy was ever ready; and she strove with all her might to make up to him, in some small degree, for his separation from his mother.

Her life was, no doubt, happier for the change. The call he made on her love and sympathy drew her out of herself, gave her an object in her life, softened and warmed her. Her face now seldom wore its accustomed scowl; a gentler expression had come into her always beautiful eyes; and the likeness which Mervyn had at first refused to see now struck him forcibly. She was no longer encased in an armour of coldness and reserve; she forgot herself, in fact, in her desire to keep Mervyn happy. What she dreaded most was to see his face overcast; she could not bear him to be depressed by the life which habit had made so natural to her; and she was always watching fearfully for the moments when his longing for his mother should overcome him, and make him listless and dejected. But it was only now and then that he was cast down. Thanks to Nina, his fits of sorrow came now less violently and at much longer intervals. His natural high spirits and power of enjoyment asserted themselves over the uncongenial circumstances in which he found himself thrown; and no one who heard him laughing and talking with Nina, as they galloped over the country, would suppose he had a care or a sorrow in the world.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GHOST IN THE SHRUBBERY.

NINA was now always glad, for Mervyn's sake, when they were sent for before dinner, little as she cared for it herself.

But as the shooting season went on the house was fuller than ever, and at one time nearly three weeks had elapsed without a summons.

At last, one evening it came. Mervyn was delighted; and his spirits rose so high, that Nina felt quite pleased too.

But it was an unfortunate evening. Mrs. Middleton was in a bad temper, and found fault with Nina directly she came into the room. Cecily, too, was awkward, and managed to upset a flower-stand. There was nothing but scolding all the time. Colonel Middleton was tired with his day's shooting, and lay in an arm-chair reading the paper, and taking no notice of any of them.

On their return to the school-room Mervyn's spirits gave way.

Nina waited till Cecily had gone to bed, and then came up to the window where he was sitting.

'What is the matter, Mervyn?'

'Oh, Nina!' he exclaimed, with a burst of tears, 'I do want mother so badly.'

Nina bent down and kissed his forehead, taking refuge in her old answer.

'She will soon be back again.'

'No one seems to love anyone in this house'—he went on passionately—'it is a dreadful house to be in.'

Nina was powerless to comfort him. She felt how true it was. Had she not often suffered from the same feeling herself?

But she had a cure which had never failed her at such times. She would try its power now.

'Come and see Totty,' she whispered.

The boy raised himself wearily, and followed her without a word.

So the two children stole up stairs, and went softly along the passages to the bedroom nursery, where Totty, not quite asleep yet, lay expecting his nightly visitor.

Nina knelt down by his pillow, and signed to Mervyn to kneel on the other side of the bed.

The little fellow smiled when he saw them, and held up his face. 'Nina,' he said, sleepily, 'kiss me, Nina.'

'Kiss Mervyn,' whispered Nina; 'he wants to be kissed too.'

Totty put one arm round Mervyn and one round Nina, drawing them together as they knelt. He was only half awake, and soon his arms relaxed their hold, and his heavy eyes closed.

Gradually he fell asleep; but the children knelt by his bedside still.

Nina was always glad to linger, and Mervyn shrank from leaving the little oasis of love and tenderness he had found in the desert of Granton.

He knelt there silently for some time, and then he whispered, 'Let's say our prayers here.'

Softly he repeated his evening prayer, and began 'Our Father;' then stopped, waiting for her to join.

But no sound came from the little bowed figure kneeling in the darkness, and he finished it as he began it—alone.

'Come away now,' he whispered; 'I'm better.' And taking her unresisting hand, he led her way.

They returned, as noiselessly as they came, to the now dark and silent school-room.

'Come out,' said Mervyn. 'I don't want to go back into that dreary room.'

So they went down a little back staircase, and opened a side door.

The moon was shining peacefully all over the lawns and gardens as the children stepped out upon the grass, and made fantastic shadows of the two little figures.

Lights were seen at the dining-room windows and the voices of the gentlemen sounded from within as they sat over their wine.

'Come into the shrubbery,' whispered Nina.

The way there led them past the drawing-room window, and they could see in. The ladies were sitting in groups all over the room. There was one old lady to

whom Mrs. Middleton was paying great court. These two were near the open window, looking over a photograph-book; and Nina fancied she caught her own name as she hurried by.

The children sped on towards the shrubbery. As they passed into its sombre paths, they came against the figure of a man, and Nina started.

'It's only me, miss,' said the voice of the head-gardener.

'Good-night Watson,' said Mervyn pleasantly.

'Good-night, sir. You're out late this evening.'

'Yes,' said Mervyn, 'we've come out for a little air.'

'I suppose you and Miss Middleton are not afraid of ghosts, sir, since you are going up to the shrubbery?'

'No,' laughed Mervyn. 'But is there a ghost there?'

'So the story goes,' answered the man. 'I can't say I've ever seen it myself; but they do say it is to be seen on moonlight nights, and those who see it are haunted by it for many a long night after.'

'What is it?' asked Mervyn. 'A shadowy lady, or or a man with his head in his hand, or what?'

'They say it's a pair of brothers' the gardener answered, smiling. 'They fought a duel there one moonlight night, for the love of the same lady, and both were killed. So they are doomed to walk arm-in arm for ever on moonlight nights. They have eyes blazing like live coal, they say, from the hatred they bear one another. But Lor' bless you, sir, it's all nonsense—it's just a tale, and nothing more. Good-night to you.' And the man passed on.

'Did you ever hear the story before, Nina?' asked Mervyn, as they walked along.

'No,' she answered. 'I have heard the maids say the shrubbery was haunted; but I never asked more. I hate ghost stories.'

'Do you?' 'I think they are rather fun. Why should you mind? You don't believe them, do you?'

'No,' she answered; 'not exactly; but they frighten me all the same, and I think of them when I don't want to, particularly when I can't get to sleep at night. Let us talk of something else.'

A short silence, and then Mervyn said, 'Nina, why wouldn't you join with me when I said "Our Father?"'

'I don't know,' she answered, in a low voice.

'Oh, you must know, Nina.'

'I was shy.'

'Shy! who of? Not me, surely!'

Nina nodded.

'Oh, Nina, how funny? And what a funny thing to be shy about. I can fancy being shy of doing anything wrong; but to be shy of saying your prayers! I never heard of such a thing.'

Nina felt really shy now.

'It isn't exactly that,' she said; 'I can't quite explain.'

'No,' he answered, 'I don't suppose you can.'

They had now reached an open part of the shrubbery, and as they moved out of the darkness into it, they were struck by the beauty of the scene they came upon. The lake lay before them, full in the light of the silvery

moon. There was not a sound to be heard, and their eyes were almost dazzled by the glitter of the moon-beams on the waters. The peace of it, and the beauty of it, affected Mervyn strangely.

'Oh, Nina!' he exclaimed, 'how beautiful! I think Heaven must be like this, don't you?'

Nina didn't answer.

'Don't you often wonder what Heaven is like?'

Still no answer.

'Why don't you speak, Nina? Don't you like talking about Heaven?'

'Yes—no—I mean I don't know what to say about it.'

'But don't you often wonder about it?'

'No, I don't think I do. But you may go on talking about it if you like. What do you think it's like?'

'I don't know exactly. One thing I'm sure it's not like, and that's Granton.'

'I don't . . . quite understand,' said Nina.

'I mean that in Heaven everybody loves everybody. Mother says Heaven is only another name for love. There's not much of it at Granton,' he said rather bitterly, as he recalled his feelings on their return that evening from the drawing-room. 'So Heaven can't be very like Granton; and if I thought it was, I'm sure I shouldn't care to go there.'

'Is it like Glen-Mervyn, do you think?' asked Nina, timidly.

'More like, I think,' he answered; 'at least when mother is there. Not unless,' he added quickly, as

memory brought before him the lawns and gardens as they had looked that day without her; 'Oh, no!' with a little shudder, 'not unless.'

Nina seemed to be thinking deeply, and at last she said, 'If Aunt Magdalen were here, would you think Granton more like Heaven?'

'Oh, yes!' he said eagerly.

'Well, but then,' said Nina, rather puzzled, 'it is having her with you that makes you think a place like Heaven.'

'Yes,' he answered; 'and she says it will be being with God that will make us so happy in Heaven. Do you know she says she wouldn't care to go to Heaven if God were not there?'

Nina looked very puzzled, and a little scared.

'"In Thy presence is the fulness of joy,"' said Mervyn; 'that is her favourite verse about Heaven. She says it explains it so well. Do you understand it, Nina?'

'Do I understand what?'

'Why that some day we shall love God so much that we shall only be happy where He is, wherever that may be.'

'No,' she said, hardly above a whisper.

'Sometimes I think you never will.'

'Do *you*?'

'Well, just a little. I understand it this way, you see. I know that I love mother so much that I am happiest when I am with her. And so that helps me to see that some day, when I love God as much as that, I

shall be happiest with Him. She says I shall understand it better and better.'

'But why do you say I shall never understand it?'

'Because you don't love your mother, Nina, and so I don't see how you are ever to learn.'

'But I love Totty,' she said quickly.

'Well, perhaps that may help you a little, but still . . . It doesn't seem to make you love other people, Nina. I really think he is the only person. In Heaven, everyone will love everyone, and you love so few. She says it's quite made of love . . . But still,' he said—suddenly breaking off short from his train of reasoning, and returning with a child's delight to the thought of a material Heaven, as he gazed on the lovely scene around him—'besides, all the love and the happiness, I dare say there will be all this, and more. The moonlight and the beautiful stillness, the golden gates, and the angels, and . . . Hark! what's that?'

It was the sound of approaching footsteps, and Mervyn drew Nina back into the bushes, and both children peered out eagerly into the darkness. Far down the shrubbery path they saw two dark shadows approaching, and shining from the figures were small red lights.

'What *are* they, Mervyn?' whispered Nina, seized with a superstitious dread; 'what *can* those shadows be?'

The gardener's story, so lately heard, forced itself upon her unwilling attention; and in spite of all she told herself to the contrary, she could not deny the witness of her own eyes, which simply showed her,

advancing steadily along, two dark forms, arm-in-arm, with eyes like live coal. At all times sensitive and imaginative, Nina's nerves were just then strung to their highest pitch. The hour, the scene around, the thoughts on which her mind had been so lately dwelling, all conspired to lift her out of the commonplace, and to intensify her superstitious dread. She felt herself to be suddenly standing on the narrow boundary-line that separates the real from the unreal, the natural from the supernatural; and she was, for the moment, unable to distinguish between the material and the spirit world. Only one thought was clear; she wished she had never come. She shivered before the slow approach of the shadows, and longed to drive them back. Not only did she dread them for the time, but she felt the thought of them would for ever haunt her, and nights of future terror rose before her. Had not the gardener said as much just now? She would have fled, but her feet seemed rooted to the ground.

Mervyn was transfixed too, but it was more by wonder than by fear. And now the shadows were close at hand. . . . But the mystery was soon cleared up.

Two figures came out into the moonlight, and stopped to look at the scene on which the children had been gazing. They were those of two gentlemen staying in the house, come out to enjoy a stroll and smoke. Their loud voices and the smell of their cigars seemed to destroy the peace and sweetness of the night. A passing cloud obscured the moon at the same moment, and completed what their presence had begun, bringing a

blight on all around. Well might Nina have dreaded their approach. No denizens of an unseen world could have wrought her more ruin in the present, or had power so to haunt her with consuming fears for the future.

The two gentlemen walked on, talking.

'How many children has Middleton?'

'Oh, a large family; seven or eight, I believe.'

'I saw a very pretty little boy at the nursery-window this evening, but he looked terribly delicate. What is the matter with him?'

'Well, that's a sad business. He has never had a day's health since he was born. I only wonder he has struggled on so long. But he will never live to grow up, poor little fellow . . . poor little fellow! . . .'

And the voices and footsteps passed away down the other side of the water, and were lost in the distance. Like birds of evil omen they had come, and everything rejoiced at their departure; and the air grew still again, and the sweet scents of nature resumed their sway; and the moon shone out peaceful as before. Only one thing was wanting. The trees, waving slightly in the breeze, seemed to bend their heads and listen, as if waiting for that missing sound, as if listening for the childish voices to speak again of love and Heaven. But they waited and listened in vain. When the moonbeams reached one of the two little figures in the bushes, they revealed a face from which all life and colour seem to have fled.

'Nina!' exclaimed Mervyn, terrified. 'Nina! speak to me! Don't look like that!'

'Mervyn!' she gasped, 'did you hear what they said?'

'Mervyn,' she entreated, without waiting for an answer; 'it isn't true, *is* it?'

And she clung to him as she spoke, looking as if life and death hung upon his answer.

'No, no, Nina darling,' he said, soothingly; 'it can't be true. They don't know. They have made a mistake.'

'But, Mervyn,' she whispered faintly, 'if it should be true!'

'Come home,' he said gently, but very firmly. 'I won't let you think about it. Their saying it doesn't make it true. Don't think about it, Nina. Forget it.'

His assumption of manly contempt for the assertion, and his protecting care, gave her courage for a moment, and she allowed him to lead her home. They passed again the lighted drawing-room, now full of gentlemen, laughing or talking, and drinking tea.

The child, flitting by in the darkness, had time to see her mother, the gayest of the gay, fanning herself and chatting gaily; had time even to see the door open, and the two smokers enter; to see the very one who had pronounced Totty's death-warrant take a chair by her mother's side, and enter, laughing, into a conversation with her.

The child could hear the mother's loud laugh even at that distance, and it jarred upon her till she turned shudderingly away.

'*Can* she know?' she asked herself; 'can she really know?'

Only too readily the answer came, with the quick stern judgment of the young.

'She knows, and she does not *care!*'

Wildly her heart swelled with the old indignation that Totty should be so despised and uncared for. It bore down even the fresh new grief, with which she had been overwhelmed just now.

She let Mervyn lead her upstairs, and, hardly knowing where she was, nor what she was doing, she found herself standing at her bed-room door.

'Good-night, Nina darling, and promise not to think of it again.'

And Mervyn held both her hands, waiting for his answer. The child's lips quivered, but she could make no sound. She *knew* she could not promise what he asked her. She held up her face to be kissed, and Mervyn was satisfied.

But all night long the words rang in her brain, keeping sleep away from her weary eyelids, and causing her to toss to and fro in her restless anxiety.

'He will never live to grow up . . . . never live to grow up . . . . poor little fellow . . . . poor little fellow . . . .'

Only varied by the constant question, '*Can* she know? Can she *really* know?' Or the bitter, bitter answer, 'She knows, and she does not *care*.'

Where were the ghosts she had feared would haunt her after hearing the story in the wood? And the

nights of horror that rose before her as she watched the shadows approach? Not once did these thoughts recur. For what were such vague fantastic terrors to those which assail her now? What grim supernatural fancy could thus stand by her pillow, and drive all sleep away.

Ah! belief in ghosts may indeed be gone in our highly civilised day, yet are there some which, with all our enlightenment, we shall never drive away. Ghosts in white garments, shadowy ladies and headless knights, with other creations of the brain, are laid for ever, swept away with the relics of a long-past age of ignorance and superstition; but torturing anxieties, haunting fears, an hourly, nameless dread: *these* are the ghosts that mar our midnight slumbers, and they will walk this earth of ours till time shall be no more.

CHAPTER XVI.

SUNDAY AT GRANTON.

THE next day was Sunday; and ten o'clock found Mervyn sitting in the school-room with his cousins. His tutor did not come on Sunday. Nina and Cecily were learning their collects and writing them out by heart, and he was writing to his mother. Madame was not in the room.

Conversation was chiefly carried on between Mervyn and Cecily. Nina was nominally doing her Sunday work, but in reality she was thinking of Totty, wondering over and over again how much truth there might be in the conversation she had overheard. Her sleepless night had left its traces on her pale little face. She hardly heard what the others were saying.

'Mervyn,' said Cecily, 'which part of the pew are you going so sit in to-day?'

'As far as I can from you,' he answered laughing, 'because you fidget so.'

'Oh no, I won't, Mervyn; please sit by me.'

'Why, last Sunday you dropped your prayer-book twice, and tumbled over the hassock every time you stood up.'

'There'll hardly be room to stand up to-day. There are such a lot of people in the house. I think there are four ladies besides mamma, and six gentlemen besides papa. How full the pew will be!'

'Why do you want to sit by me?' asked Mervyn, as he wrote down a sentence in his letter.

'You're so kind, and find my places. Nina never will.'

'Why don't you find them before you go?'

'Such a trouble,' she sighed; 'I never can remember those horrid old Roman figures. I think it was so silly of them to have letters for figures, don't you? V.'s and X.'s, and all that rubbish.'

Mervyn laughed. 'All right; I'll sit by you.'

Cecily evinced much delight.

'I think it's rather fun having a lot of people in the pew,' she went on. 'I like seeing how they behave, and what sort of things they do. Whether they take off their gloves and veils, and whether they smell salts, and fan themselves, and all that. I always think anyone who fans themselves affected. Then I like to see who kneels at the prayers, and who is lazy, and sits or lolls instead, and who listens to the sermon and who doesn't. It's great fun. Papa always goes to sleep. Do you think that's quite right of him, Mervyn? Nina thinks it's very wrong indeed. I think it's rather unkind to poor Mr. Heathcote, who's taken such trouble to make a nice sermon. I believe it takes him a long time. It seems rather unkind not to listen.'

'Do you listen, Cecily?'

'Oh no, Mervyn! I can't help thinking about other things. I do try a little, but I get tired directly.'

Just at that moment, to the children's astonishment, the door opened, and Mrs. Middleton came into the room. She was accompanied by an old lady, and in her Nina instantly recognised the one to whom she had seen her mother paying court the evening before through the drawing-room window.

'These are my little girls,' said Mrs. Middleton, 'and this is my nephew, Mervyn Lyndsay. Children, come and say, "How do you do?"'

Mervyn was up in a moment, with beaming face and outstretched hand. Nina advanced coldly, and shook hands without speaking. But Cecily hung back shy and frightened. Her mother's sudden entrance had alarmed her, and she became conscious directly of rough hair and inky fingers.

The difference between her children's manners and those of her nephew struck Mrs. Middleton forcibly, and she looked much annoyed.

'Come forward, Cecily. What are you hiding for, and why do you put your hand behind you?'

Cecily blushed all over, and stammered out something unintelligible.

'Why can't you say "Good-morning" like a lady, and not like a little charity-girl. Look at Mervyn; he shakes hands properly.'

'My hand is inky,' she said timidly.

'Young ladies' hands should never be inky. What have you been doing to make them in such a state?'

'I've been copying out my collect,' said Cecily, hanging her head.

'And I've been writing to mother,' laughed Mervyn, holding out his hands. 'Mine are worse than Cecily's.'

The old lady turned to him directly. 'What a handsome boy,' she said, *sotto voce*. Then added, out loud, 'Ah! you've been writing to your mother, have you? Give her my love, and tell her I think you are very like her.'

'Do you know her?' said Mervyn eagerly.

The old lady replied in the affirmative, and he at once plunged into conversation with her.

Her attention was thus completely distracted from Mrs. Middleton's children, although she had been brought to the school-room on purpose to see Nina, whose photograph she had admired in the book last night.

Mrs. Middleton was very much annoyed at Nina's pale and languid appearance, which quite spoilt her good looks, and provoked with both daughters for appearing to such disadvantage. She felt that they had been a failure, and that Mervyn had carried all before him. Still, she did not feel angry with *him*. He looked so handsome, so bright, and so pleasant, that she could not wonder the old lady should have been most taken with him. She left the room in a very bad temper, and went to put on her things for church.

As soon as Nina was ready for church, she joined Mervyn, and they both stood at the school-room window, watching the party stream across the lawn.

'How smart they all are,' he said. 'Look at the gowns and the parasols; every colour under the sun. There goes Uncle Rowley, with a white waistcoat and a flower in his button-hole. Where's Aunt Lydia? Oh! there she comes. She's lost something. Look what a hunt she's having.'

Mrs. Middleton heard voices and looked up.

'What have you lost, Aunt Lydia?' shouted Mervyn.

'My prayer-book,' she answered: 'see if you can find me one.'

'Do you know the "Te Deum" by heart?' he called out.

'Yes. Why?'

'Because I could lend you my second-best prayer-book if you did. It's all there but the "Te Deum," and that's torn out. Shall I throw it to you? Look out! Catch!'

'No! no! certainly not!' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton, gesticulating violently; 'bring it down.'

She was too late. Mervyn had hurled the book at her, and it came fluttering down through the air with so true an aim that it hit her parasol and knocked it out of her hand.

'Butter fingers!' escaped involuntarily from Mervyn's lips, but fortunately the word did not reach his aunt's ears. 'You needn't mind,' he called out, as he observed the look of horror with which she picked it up; 'it's only my second best!'

Madame was now heard calling, and Mervyn and Nina followed her downstairs. They did not go the

same way as the drawing-room party, who avoided stiles and gates, so they arrived in church first, and established themselves before the others came.

Mervyn sat between Nina and Cecily, and all three were told by Madame to take up as little room as possible. She herself contrived to squeeze into a little corner up against a pillar, as flat as a pancake.

Cecily proceeded to announce everybody in a loud whisper as they arrived.

'There's Mr. Mellish the miller, and his wife. Here come the butcher and *his* wife. They haven't brought their little boy to-day. Perhaps he's got a cold. Oh! look at the turnpike woman. She's got a new bonnet. She hasn't had one for a year. Here's poor old Langley; see how bent double he is. One could quite sit on his back. Look at his dear old smock-frock. Oh, Mervyn, isn't it fun being early and seeing all the people arrive? Here's Jones the gardener and his two daughters. How stiff his neckcloth is; he can hardly turn his head. You see he only wears it on Sunday. Oh, I say! the cheesemonger and *all* his family are gone into deep mourning since last Sunday. What *can* have happened? Oh dear me, here's mamma! . . .' And Cecily instantly became a model of propriety, as the party, led by Mrs. Middleton, filed into church.

There was a great rustling and arranging, for it certainly was a large party, and quite as many as the pew could hold. Nina's eyes were often on her father and mother that day during the service. They were exactly opposite her, for it was a square pew. Mrs. Middleton

was clearly in a very bad temper, and took no part in the service at all, and Colonel Middleton was half the time talking and laughing with the young man next him. Mervyn, disturbed by the whispering, looked up once or twice, and his eye travelling on to Nina, he was astonished at the expression of her face, and wondered what she could be thinking of to make her look so. Once, during the reading of the Commandments, Mrs. Middleton spoke angrily to her husband. There was something wrong with the seat, and she seemed to hold him responsible. He answered, laughing, which seemed to make her more angry than ever. In the middle of their discussion Nina raised her eyes. Just at that moment sounded in measured tones from the chancel, 'Honour thy father and thy mother.' Clear rose the treble notes of Mervyn's voice, and his eyes showed where his thoughts had flown. Deep in her hands Nina buried her face, and from the tightly-closed little mouth came no sound at all. The clergyman gave for his text, 'In Thy presence is the fulness of joy.' Mervyn exchanged a glance with Nina, which she acknowledged with her eyes. The sermon, as it went on, affected her strangely. It was very homely, very plain; but it recalled Mervyn's words by the moonlit water, and seemed to make clearer what he had tried to explain. When the clergyman spoke of happy homes, warmed by family affection, she was all at sea; such happiness found no parallel in her loveless home. But when he went on to particular affections, she could think of her little brother, and placing herself in fancy by his bed,

the meaning dawned more clear. Thus does God choose the weak things of the world to work His sovereign purposes. For when the sermon ended, she had told herself that if she only loved God as she loved Totty, she would be able to say with the Psalmist, 'In Thy presence is the fulness of joy.'

With these thoughts swelling in her heart, she followed the party out of church.

'Well, that was a poor performance,' said one of the gentlemen.

'Terribly long,' whined the old lady. 'I nearly went to sleep.'

The others chimed in, in the same strain, and then walked on, still talking the sermon over, and heedless of the presence of the children. Their words and their voices jarred as they fell, upon the sensitive feelings of the child. The thoughts suggested by the sermon fled away, her fair dream vanished, and she felt as if she had been foolish to be so impressed by what had affected grown-up people so little.

Half ashamed of her own feelings, and yet shrinking from hearing the discourse pulled to pieces, she retreated to Madame's side, and walked on in silence.

Cecily was hand-in-hand with her father some way on, and Mervyn was running after them. Presently he fell back, and came to join Nina.

'Nina, why do you stay behind?'

'I don't know.'

'What is the matter, Nina?'

'I don't know.'

'Come and talk,' he said, pulling her away from Madame. Nina did not resist him.

'The clergyman said just the same as mother, didn't he?' he said triumphantly. 'I was thinking of her all the time. Who were you thinking of, Nina?'

'Totty,' she answered, roused and comforted by his sympathetic appreciation. 'I liked the sermon, Mervyn; didn't you?'

And she looked rather anxiously at him.

'Oh yes,' he said warmly; 'I listened to every word.'

Just then Colonel Middleton was heard shouting to Mervyn, and the boy ran away. But though regretting that their conversation should be so abruptly broken off, Nina did not relapse into the sad state in which he had found her. His few words, and the sight of his bright face, had made her quite happy again, and she was independent now of the criticisms of her father's friends. She entered quietly into conversation with Madame, and troubled herself no more.

'Lydia,' said Colonel Middleton, as he watched Mervyn coming, 'it strikes me we don't see enough of this boy. He must be very dull here, cooped up in a school-room with little girls. At any rate, his evenings must be slow work. Why not have him down to dessert?'

Mrs. Middleton answered that as their own children never came to dessert, it had not occurred to her, but that she was quite willing he should come. 'Only,' she added, 'I won't have the girls. It is quite against my principles.'

'The girls are another affair,' he answered. 'Mervyn

is only here for a time, and I don't see why he is to be kept so tight.'

That evening a pompous message was sent up to the school-room to the effect that Mr. Lyndsay was to present himself for the future in the dining-room at a quarter before nine, which message was received with acclamations by the said Mr. Lyndsay.

'But I don't like leaving you alone, Nina dear,' he said, as they sat together in the school-room, waiting for the hour to come; shan't you be very dull and lonely?'

Nina had certainly felt a little dismayed at the prospect. She had learned to prize his society so much, and to look forward to their long evenings together; but she was glad he should have some change. So she did not let her own disappointment appear.

'I shall go to bed soon,' she answered.

'Yes; and I'll come and tell you all about it on my way to bed,' he said eagerly.

It was an unfortunate evening for Nina to be left alone; for she was still haunted by the words she had overheard the night before, and her mind was full of fears about her little brother. He had caught a fresh cold a day or two before, and two nights running she had found him awake and coughing.

When Mervyn was gone down stairs, she went to the bed-room nursery, and found him awake again. No singing by his side had any effect; and at last she took him out of bed, wrapped him up in a shawl, and walked him up and down the room. After a time he dozed off,

and she was putting him gently into bed again, when the head nurse came in. She was very much offended at the whole transaction, and gave vent to her annoyance in a volley of words. But Nina did not heed her. Totty was asleep. That was all she cared for, and she returned to her bed-room comparatively satisfied about him. She was dropping off to sleep herself when Mervyn rushed in, full of what had been said and done down stairs, and his hands full of candied orange-peel and other delicacies which he had saved for her from his own dessert, and which he crammed into her mouth in the darkness with great vigour.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MIDNIGHT SCENE.

Colonel and Mrs. Middleton attended a county ball the next evening, and as they drove home from it Mrs. Middleton mused with great satisfaction on the events of the evening. She had, altogether, been very successful. Her party had enjoyed themselves; she had provided some of the prettiest girls in the room; and she herself had been asked to dance nearly all the quadrilles and lancers. This last was a great satisfaction to her, because she was always a little shaky about her age, always a little afraid that she was considered a middle-aged woman. Her husband looked, and was, so much younger than she, that she was constantly in dread of being taken for his mother.

They reached home at about half-past one o'clock; and after wishing her guests good-night, Mrs. Middleton went slowly up the stairs, candle in hand, humming a waltz, and laughingly remarking to her husband that her feet quite ached with dancing.

As she passed a great mirror on the stairs, she involuntarily stopped to look at the reflection of herself in it, with the light of the lamp shining on her. The

glass gave back the picture of a prosperous woman, a woman satisfied with herself, and on good terms with the world in general.

'I am sure I improve in looks as I get older,' she inwardly reflected. 'I hope it will go on till Nina comes out.'

She was moving slowly on, when a sound from upstairs caused her involuntarily to stop and listen.

It was a low wailing cry from the direction of the nursery; and coming on the top of such different reflections, it struck her with a kind of chill.

'It is Totty,' she said half out loud. 'What can make him cry at this hour?' Then she remembered how Wilson the head-nurse was away for a night, and how that probably he was affected by her absence. She listened again, and the cry was repeated.

'Too bad of Wilson,' muttered Mrs. Middleton; 'she accustoms him to this walking and singing, and now he can't sleep without it.'

She walked on; but the wailing increased, and she stopped again to listen.

'Perhaps he is not well. I think I will go up and see what is the matter; but I must get off my gown first.'

She went into her dressing-room, and rang for her maid; but the sound of crying pursued her even there, and she began to get uneasy.

'Go up to the nursery, and see what is the matter with Master Thomas,' she said hastily, as soon as her maid appeared.

She walked up and down rather restlessly meanwhile. 'So tiresome, if he is going to be ill while Wilson is away.'

Mrs. Middleton had no experience of illness; all her children had been strong; and Totty, the only exception, she had always given over entirely to Wilson in matters of health. She thought she saw difficulties presenting themselves, and it made her rather nervous. She continued to pace up and down till her maid reappeared.

'Well?' she said sharply.

'Master Thomas seems very unwell, ma'am,' said the maid. 'The nursery-maid says he has not slept more than an hour all night, and she can do nothing with him. He seems very feverish, and coughs a good deal.'

'Wait here till I come back,' said Mrs. Middleton; and she went straight upstairs as she was—satin gown, wreath, diamonds, and all. She stopped for a minute at the door of the bed-room nursery and looked in.

Totty, evidently very feverish, was tossing about restlessly, crying and coughing. The nursery-maid was sitting on his bed, vainly trying to quiet him and get him to sleep.

'Sing Dinah,' he kept on saying piteously.

Mrs. Middleton was frightened. The child looked so frail and ill, and she was so unaccustomed to the sight of sick children. Totty, though delicate, had seldom been seriously ill; and she felt so helpless in the absence of the nurse, and saw that the nursery-maid was helpless too.

It was such a sudden change from the gay scene she had left—so quick a transition from the thoughts on which her mind had been so lately dwelling. In her fear she jumped to conclusions directly. It was a new sensation for her. She had never lost a child, or conceived the possibility of such a thing; and as the idea rushed upon her, a feeling of rare tenderness rose in her breast, and she told herself that Totty, of all her children, was the one she could least spare. 'He is the only one of the lot who ever comes to be kissed, or shows me any affection,' said an unwonted voice in her heart. The sense of personal responsibility, too, weighed her down, and she advanced very nervously into the room. Still it was with her usual imperious manner that she motioned away the nursery-maid, and took her place on the bed.

But she had forgotten how startling her appearance would be to the child—a figure decked in satin and flowers coming into his room in the darkness—and was not prepared for the convulsive start, and the expression of terror in his eyes.

'Go away, go away!' he exclaimed, shrinking from her. 'I don't want you. Smart lady, go away.'

With the unwonted tenderness swelling in her heart, the child's words fell blankly on the mother's ear. Not a muscle of her face moved: for all the world, she would not have shown how much they hurt her; but they hit her none the less sharply for that.

She was obliged to get up and move out of the way, while the dismayed nursery-maid exclaimed, 'Master

Totty, dear! it's your mamma! Don't you know your mamma?'

Totty stared hard, and Mrs. Middleton again advanced to the bed; but the moment the night-light shone upon her, he clung to Jane, as terrified as ever.

'No, no!' he cried, 'send her away. She shines so. She's on fire. Take the fire away. I'm so hot.'

Mrs. Middleton and Jane both thought he must be raving, till the latter perceived that the light just caught the necklace and pendant on Mrs. Middleton's neck, making them glow and sparkle.

'I think it's the diamonds, ma'am,' she said timidly; for all the servants were afraid of Mrs. Middleton.

'Then undo the thing and take it off,' said her mistress, harshly; 'and be quick!'

She came near and held her head, so that Jane should unfasten the clasp. In so doing the light played upon her tiara, and Totty bursts out again.

'Her hair . . . the fire! . . . Look!'

With no gentle hand Mrs. Middleton tore the tiara from her head and thrust it, with the necklace and bracelets, into Jane's hand.

'Take them and throw them under the bed,' she exclaimed. Her voice sounded dry and hard, and the hand which held out the diamonds trembled a little; but her face was immovable.

'Totty, don't you know mamma now?' she said, bending over the child.

The lustrous blue eyes met hers for a moment, and their glance was one of recognition; but there was no

sign of pleasure, no sign hardly of interest, and he relapsed into his wailing cry, 'Sing Dinah, mamma.'

'What does he mean, Jane?'

'It's some song, ma'am, that Mrs. Wilson sings him to sleep with, and he's been asking for it all night. The tune's gone out of my head, or else I believe I should have got him to sleep long ago.'

'Mamma will sing you to sleep to-night, Totty,' whispered Mrs. Middleton. 'What shall she sing?'

'Sing Dinah, mamma,' he repeated.

Mrs. Middleton had dance music ringing in her head, and began humming a slow, soothing valse.

But Totty burst out crying. 'Not that! not that! Sing Dinah.'

Poor Mrs. Middleton tried another tune, but each one was received by the same plaintive entreaty: 'Oh, please, not that. Sing Dinah.'

'But, my dear little boy,' she exclaimed, quite in despair, 'I don't know Dinah. I can't sing it.'

All the mother was awake in her now, and she felt she would give anything in the world to be able to find out what the poor little fellow wanted, and to be the one to soothe him to sleep.

He was getting very excited, and the chances of sleep seemed slighter every moment. Crying, too, made him cough more violently; and altogether she was getting quite alarmed about him.

Anxiety had the effect of making her angry, and she turned sharply round upon Jane.

'How is it you can't remember this tune?'

'I'm very sorry, ma'am,' answered Jane, 'but it's clean gone out of my head. He'd go to sleep in a minute if we could find it, and he'd wake quite well, for it's sleep he wants more than anything.'

'But what is to be done if we can't get him to sleep?' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton. 'Good gracious! is there no one in the house who has heard the child sung to sleep, night after night as it goes on? Does no one ever come near the nursery, or take the slightest interest in . . . .' What could have made Mrs. Middleton stop short in her sentence, and have caused that curious expression to pass over her face? Her theories and her practice were perfect; she never could conceive herself to blame in any way; she never by any chance owned herself in the wrong; everything that she did *must* be right, simply because she did it. What, then, could have made her cheek flush a little as she put the question? And why did she stop short in her lecture to the nursery-maid? And why at that moment, of all moments, when her thoughts were so pre-occupied, should a foolish old proverb come dinning in her head, which she had not heard or thought of for years: 'They that live in glass houses should not throw stones?' 'What *is* to be done?' she hastily finished.

The nursery-maid was about to answer, when a slight sound at the door made her look round; and she was so startled at what she saw there, that an exclammation burst from her lips, which Mrs. Middleton was too pre-occupied to notice.

There, standing in the doorway, was Nina. She was

in her little white night-gown, and her feet were bare. Her dark hair hung down over her shoulders, and she carried a little lamp in her hand. The light, shining on her features, revealed her handsome little face, wearing its most resolute expression. Steadily she advanced into the room, and her mother, bending over Totty, with her back to the door, did not perceive her entrance. Nearer and nearer she came, her eyes bright with excitement, and yet having in them a far-away expression, as if they reached on to her gaol, Totty's bedside, and saw nothing either to the right hand or the left on the way. Still Mrs. Middleton did not look round. Totty began tossing about more restlessly than ever, perpetually moaning, 'I so sleepy, so sleepy. Sing Dinah, mamma.'

'My poor little boy,' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton, 'I wish I could. But I don't know the song, dear; I never heard it.'

'I can sing it,' said a clear young voice close by; and Mrs. Middleton, turning sharply round, came face to face with her little daughter. Astonishment took from her the power of utterance. She gazed at the little white-robed figure as if it had been an apparition; though, even in the startled hurry of the moment, she had time to admire the handsome little face with the lamp-light on it, the dark eyes shining like two stars, and the firm mouth. Nina met her mother's glance fully, and did not shrink the least. In fact she was the most unconcerned of the two, for Mrs. Middleton *did* shrink a little from the glance of defiance shot at her

from those sparkling eyes. She was in an unusually tender frame of mind; unnerved and anxious; more in need of loving sympathy than she had ever been in her life; and perhaps it struck her, as she met that glance, how utterly void of child-like affection were those dark eyes. Perhaps, too, already hurt by Totty's indifference, she was wounded to find the same feeling intensified in the heart of another of her children. But for the moment, all these feelings were drowned in relief, when Totty held out his arms to his sister, and said: 'Carry me, Nina; put me to sleep;' and Nina answered, 'Yes, darling, I will.'

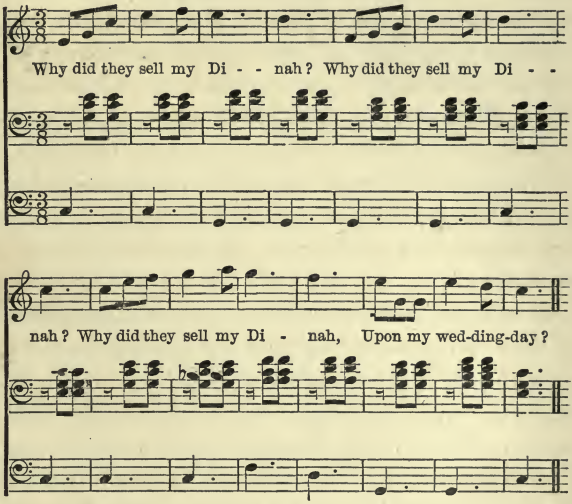
Mrs. Middleton watched her as in a dream. She saw Nina put down the lamp, and, bending over Totty, push back the hair from his face, and arrange his night-gown about his feet. She saw, with astonishment, the eyes that had shot defiance at her, assume the glow of tender affection. She saw the love and the pity breaking out from all parts of the face, till the child seemed transformed, and she was too bewildered to speak.

'Sing Dinah, Nina; sing Dinah!'

'I will, darling, I will.'

Did that soft whisper come from Nina, from that cold imperious child? How tenderly she lifts him in her arms, and how confidingly he puts his head on her shoulder, and his arms round her neck. Fearing that he may be cold she wraps a worsted shawl round him, carefully enveloping his little bare feet. The oft-repeated entreaty meets with a response now, and softly

the quaint ditty sounds through the room, and the plaintive wail of the child ceases.



Gradually the heavy eyes close, the arms relax their hold, and he falls asleep.

Meanwhile, what are the feelings of the mother, thus set aside, and vanquished? They are mixed and various. Something have they of relief, something of humiliation, and something of admiration, not unmixed with a kind of anger and jealousy. She could not tell *why* that longing had risen in her breast to do for her boy what he so earnestly desired, nor why her heart was so sore at not being able. And then to see another—and that other her own child—step in where there was no place

for her, and do what she had been powerless to accomplish! And do it, too, in such an independent way. *That* was what galled her so. They were both independent of her, these children. She was an outsider, a looker-on; she, their mother; she, who had always been accustomed to be first of all, and to be put before everybody. Here she was nobody. It was a sore humiliation; her feelings and her pride were alike hurt by it.

'Why do I not gain my children's affection?' she asked herself bitterly, as she watched the two pacing up and down—both seeming so far from her, so near to each other.

In spite of herself, she was fascinated watching them; in spite of herself, she admired and gazed at them. In spite of herself, Nina's watchful face, bending over the sleeping boy, attracted her and filled her with a new feeling. She could not help looking at her with a certain kind of respect; she felt that there was that in the child of which she had had no idea; realised that there were two sides to Nina's character, and was puzzled. The one Nina was well known to her, but this Nina was a stranger; this one lived a life of which she, her mother, knew nothing, and with which she had nothing to do. And, with a sharp pang at her heart, came into her mind the passage—'Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter.'

Ever since the arrival of Mervyn, with his engaging ways and pretty little attentions, she had had a dissatisfied feeling about her own children, and wondered wherein the difference lay. *Now* she began to think

that in Nina, perhaps, the same feelings lay dormant, and that it was *she* who failed in drawing them out. For the first time, she began to doubt herself, and to question a little whether the fault did not lie with her. The look which Nina had shot at her had hurt her, frightened her; there was something so like hatred in the glance. It came just at the moment, too, when she was feeling so unusually tender; otherwise she would not have noticed it. Generally, she ascribed such expressions in Nina's face to the child's nature; she was cold, proud, unaccountable. But how could she think this now? How could she mistake the tenderness which pervaded every line of the face which was bending over the sleeping boy?

Nina, all this time, was quite unconscious of her mother's presence. She was entirely wrapped in her little brother, and had forgotten everything in her anxiety for him. Up and down she paced, up and down, still softly singing the monotonous tune; watching with trembling anxiety the little face on her shoulder, lest the child should awake again.

Satisfied at last that he was sleeping soundly, she signed to the nursery-maid to re-arrange his bed, and then gently laid him down. But to the last she continued singing, lest the change of position should rouse him.

Her labour of love completed, she sank down on a chair exhausted, arms and knees alike trembling under the boy's weight.

Mrs. Middleton's impulse was to take her in her arms

and thank her, so great was the relief of seeing Totty sleeping at last. But a kind of shyness born of pride prevented her. She told herself not to act on impulse, but to consider first what she meant to say.

She rose, and bent over the little bed, to gain a few moments for reflection. When she turned round Nina was gone.

Mrs. Middleton hurried after her; but when she got to the door the child had disappeared. The mother strained her eyes through the darkness, to see if she could catch a glimpse of the little white figure threading its way along the passages; but she saw no sign of it.

With a sense of disappointment for which she could not account, she turned towards her own apartments. The clock struck three as she entered her dressing-room; the candles had burnt down in their sockets, and her maid had fallen asleep by the fire.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

Mrs. Middleton woke the next morning to hear that Totty had passed a good night, and was pretty well. Things often look very different by daylight; and she told herself she had been unnecessarily alarmed. With the night, too, her other phases of feeling passed away, and she accused herself of weakness with regard to both children.

Nina's conduct, certainly, still filled her with surprise, but it ceased to inspire her with any deeper emotion. She mused upon it for a long time, but could not understand it the least. That it was her habit to be a great deal with Totty was evident, and that she exercised a very strong influence over him was also very clear.

'*I* never saw her notice the younger ones,' she reflected.

In vain did Mrs. Middleton try to get to the bottom of it. She went up to the nursery as soon as she was dressed. She heard Nina and Cecily going down to their school-room breakfast, and was provoked with herself to find that she was glad she had not passed

them on the stairs. She could not conceal from herself that she shrank from meeting Nina after what had occurred.

She found Totty pale and languid, with a good deal of cough, but otherwise much as he had been for some time past.

In the course of the day Wilson, the head-nurse returned, and Mrs. Middleton had a long talk with her, in her dressing-room, about the boy. She harped on the old subject of singing him to sleep, proving that it was to that habit that all the mischief of last night was attributable.

'I always said so, Wilson, and now you see how right I am. The consequence, is, that you can't go away for a night without the child making himself ill for want of sleep.'

She then proceeded to relate how Nina had appeared, and how at last Totty had been got to sleep. She was too proud to ask Wilson any questions; but rather hoped the nurse might, in her answer, throw some light upon the subject.

Wilson, in defending herself, somehow contrived to throw the blame upon Nina, implying that, of course, if the child expected his sister after he had been put to bed, he lay awake waiting for her.

'What do you mean?' asked Mrs. Middleton.

Wilson answered, that for some weeks past she had been trying to break Totty of the habit, as he seemed a a little stronger, and had more than once put him to bed awake; but that one evening, on returning at

supper-time to see how he was getting on, she had found Miss Nina singing him to sleep.

The conversation lasted some time, and when it was over, Wilson was dispatched to the school-room to tell Miss Middleton she was to come at once to her mother's dressing-room.

When the nurse was gone, Mrs. Middleton went to the open window and leaned out. She was musing on the events of the night, and on what had passed be-between her and Wilson. She was also trying to settle in her own mind what she meant to say to Nina when she appeared. She was determined to be very firm, and to insist upon obedience. The arm of the law was on her side, and she was going to take full advantage of it. And yet, for once in her life, she felt a little nervous at the prospect. She had an intuitive instinct that a struggle was impending, and hardly knew how to nerve herself to meet it. The child had come out in such a new light that she felt a little afraid of her; involuntarily she respected her; she could not but feel that Nina had been victorious last night, and who could tell that she would not be the victor again?

Leaning out of the window, she debated the question in her mind, and could find no satisfactory answer. So, once before, did we see Magdalen Lyndsay stand; feeling, just like Mrs. Middleton, that a struggle was impending; and, like her, trying to nerve herself to meet it. But how differently! Love, gentleness, and patience, were the weapons with which she armed herself, and she came to the conflict with prayer. Mrs. Middle-

ton was destitute of all these, and unconscious how defenceless she was without them. Her weapons were a strong will, uncompromising determination, and the power of authority. We shall see how she fared with them.

Three months ago that day, mother and son faced the struggle of their lives; mother and daughter have theirs before them now. . . . .

'Do you want me, mamma?'

Mrs. Middleton started as the clear young voice sounded in the room, and involuntarily shrank back a little. It brought back so clearly the scene of last night, and the way in which the same measured tones had fallen on her ear—'I can sing it.' She recalled so vividly her feelings when she turned round and confronted the little white-robed figure with its streaming hair, and the sense almost of fear with which she had met the glance of those sparkling eyes. She felt as if she *could* not encounter them again, lest she should read in them the dislike which had dismayed her before.

And then the cold ring in the voice, the indifferent, independent tone. Just so had it rung on her ear at midnight; hurting and galling her as it fell. It hurt and galled her now. And, as if to bring out the cold indifference in sharper contrast, how it had changed to thrilling tones of love directly after, in answer to Totty's appeal.

'I will, darling, I will.'

She felt almost as jealous of the girl's love for her

brother, as she had felt for the boy's love for Nina. *Both* so independent of her. She was stung, injured, and indignant, all in one. She felt more unwilling every instant to confront the child again. With the little figure photographed in her mind, she dreaded to turn round and see it standing there.

But sooner or later it must be done; and she wheeled round suddenly, and saw Nina standing in the doorway. But the aspect of the girl in her school-room pinafore, and plaited hair, was so different to that of the image she had conjured up, that Mrs. Middleton took courage.

The sparkle in the eyes was gone, and they were heavy with want of sleep and undue excitement. There was no brilliancy in the face; it was very white, and the child looked altogether ill and languid. Many mothers would have taken alarm at the girl's appearance, but Mrs. Middleton's only feeling was personal relief.

The pale little school-room girl before her was a different creature to the beautiful defying apparition of last night; and she felt less nervous at the thought of the task which lay before her.

'Come in, and shut the door,' she said.

Nina obeyed, and came and stood in front of her mother, who had meanwhile seated herself in an arm-chair. And then there was a silence. Nina waited quietly for her mother to begin; and Mrs. Middleton felt that nothing was more impossible. There she sat, and there, opposite her, stood the erect, motionless little figure.

The ticking of the clock, and the crackling of the fire, were distinctly heard in the silence that reigned in the room. Mrs. Middleton got quite provoked with herself at last for not knowing how to begin, but feared being at a disadvantage if she hurried into the discussion too unguardedly.

'Totty is better,' she said at last.

Clearly Nina had not expected this beginning, for her eyes softened a little, and a faint glow broke out on her cheek.

'Yes,' she answered.

'Did you know it before, Nina?'

'Yes, mamma.'

'How?'

Nina hesitated.

'Speak out!' said Mrs. Middleton, sharply.

Nina's face instantly assumed an expression of haughty indifference.

'I saw him this morning,' she answered.

'Indeed! And pray how do you find time to pay visits to the nursery between breakfast and your lessons?'

'It wasn't between breakfast and lessons.'

'When was it, then?'

No answer.

'Nina! answer me directly.'

'It was before breakfast.'

'Why, I was up there myself at eight, and heard you and Cecily going straight down from your room to the school-room.'

'It was before that.'

'Tell me instantly when it was.'

'I don't know the exact hour.'

'Was it before your hair was done?'

'Yes.'

'Was it before you were dressed?'

'Yes.'

'Was it directly you were called?'

'No.'

'*When* was it then? Speak out.'

Very unwillingly the answer came. 'It was before I was called, directly I woke; but I don't know what o'clock it was.'

A short silence after this. Mrs. Middleton, with that sore jealous feeling increasing in her heart, saw that Nina's anxiety had been greater than her own, and that she had been beforehand with her in enquiring after the boy's health. She was nettled, and lost her temper.

'And pray how long is it since you took this fancy to Totty?' she said, in her most disagreeable manner. 'I thought you were too grand to play with the younger ones.'

Poor Nina! This sudden attack was too much for her. Her eyes filled with tears, and she twisted her hands nervously together. There was a terrible struggle between her feelings and her pride. She would have given worlds to have said she didn't care for Totty *much*, while at the same time the very thought of him made her heart beat wildly.

Mrs. Middleton felt more irritated than she had been

yet. No word of hers produced any effect upon Nina, while the very mention of her little brother produced this wonderful change. Again she seemed to see the face she had watched last night hurl defiance at her, and then melt and glow as it bent over Totty. Again she felt the outsider—the looker-on. Again she felt how near the two were together, and how completely independent of her. A few minutes ago she had felt jealous of Nina for having been beforehand with her that morning in showing anxiety and love for Totty. *Now* she felt jealous of Totty for being able to inspire all gentle emotions where she failed to extract anything but coldness and indifference. She bit her lip fiercely, lest her face should betray some of the emotion she felt.

'How long,' she resumed presently, 'have you been in the habit of going to the nursery after Totty is in bed?'

Nina winced a little, and then answered, 'I can't remember.'

'That is nonsense, Nina.'

'I *really* can't, mamma.'

'Then think.'

The ticking of the clock and the cracking of the fire again made themselves heard; and Mrs. Middleton wondered if the girl meant to answer, and what course was to be pursued if she did not.

But Nina raised her head presently, and said,

'It may be two years, or more. I have done it for so long that I can't remember.'

Mrs. Middleton was quite overwhelmed with astonish-

ment. 'Why, Wilson spoke of it as of quite a new thing the last few days.'

'Wilson didn't know.'

'Did no one ever know?'

'No, no one . . except . . .'

'Except who?'

'Except Mervyn. He found it out.'

The calm cold little voice softened just a little as it pronounced Mervyn's name; and the mother, with that sore jealous feeling lying in her breast, noticed it directly. Here, then, was another who could awaken in her child feelings she herself was powerless to inspire.

'Why did you not tell *me*?' she burst out.

'Why *should* I?' answered Nina.

The cold answer stung Mrs. Middleton to the quick. It showed again the perfect independence, the complete indifference. It was as much to say, 'Why should I tell *you* of my hopes, my fears, my sorrows? What are they to *you?*'

And surging once more in her brain was the verse which had come into her mind with such a sharp pang last night—'Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter.'

'You knew very well I should forbid it,' she said, coldly, after a few minutes' pause; 'I suppose that was why.'

No answer.

'At any rate, now that I know it, I *do* forbid it. You must never do it again, Nina.'

The hot blood came rushing all over Nina's face and

neck, and she pressed her hands tightly together. She lost all control over himself for a moment.

'Never do it again!' she exclaimed breathlessly, 'never go and see Totty at night again! Oh mamma, mamma, you can't mean it!'

'But I *do* mean it,' answered Mrs. Middleton.

'And why?' burst out Nina.

Mrs. Middleton, taken by surprise, was about to say it was for Totty's own good, and to repeat what Wilson had said about the child lying awake, expecting his sister; but Nina's flashing eyes and imperious manner put her back up, and she asked herself *why* she should condescend to explain her reasons. Her innate selfishness resumed its sway; and, forgetting the child's side of the question, she only thought of her own, and grew indignant at the idea of her authority being questioned.

'That is no business of yours,' she answered in a hard dry voice. 'Those are my orders, and all you have got to do is to obey them.'

All the passionate feeling faded out of Nina's eyes as she listened. The flush died away from her cheek; she drew herself up a little, and her face became almost rigid. She had evidently taken a resolution of some kind, and by it meant to abide. Mrs. Middleton waited for an answer, but none came.

'Nina!' she exclaimed, angrily.

'Yes, mamma.'

'Do you hear what I say?'

'Yes, mamma.'

'Are you going to obey me?

Very quietly the child raised her dark eyes, looked her mother full in the face, and answered, in a low clear voice, 'I cannot obey you, mamma.'

Mrs. Middleton could hardly believe her ears. She was dumbfounded, and did not know how to proceed. Her temper got the better of her.

'How dare you speak to me like that?' she exclaimed; 'what do you *mean* by saying such a thing to your mother?—a wretched little girl like you!'

An angry retort rose to Nina's lips, when she heard a sound in the garden below, and she checked herself and listened. It was Mervyn's voice, calling to her in tones of great joy and excitement.

'Nina! Nina! where are you? I have got a letter from mother, and I want to read it to you. Oh, Nina! it is such a dear letter.'

And a sound followed as if the boy were rapturously kissing the paper. Mother and daughter, confronting each other with flashing eyes and stormy faces, both heard the words and the eager embraces; both recognised the glad love in the tones; and both instinctively averted their glance, one from the other.

Mrs. Middleton turned sharply away to the window, and pretended to be looking out, and Nina hastily dashed away a tear that she felt rising to her eyes.

'You are the coldest, most unnatural child in the world,' said Mrs. Middleton, much agitated. 'I wish Mervyn was my child instead of you.'

The moment she had said the words she would have given worlds to recall them. She was determined to

crush the spirit of rebellion and disobedience in her daughter by the force of authority, and feared she had lost ground by her momentary weakness. She changed her tone directly.

'Either you will obey me, Nina,' she said in her hardest manner, 'or you will take the consequence. So choose for yourself Do not for an instant suppose I am not going to have my way.'

There is no saying what answer Nina would have made a few moments before; but the very sound of Mervyn's voice had woke up all her better feelings, and her frame of mind had changed. She was touched, too, by her mother's unusual display of feeling.

'Mamma,' she said, earnestly, 'I do not want to disobey you; *indeed* I do not. But I cannot promise not to go and see Totty, because I know I should break my word. *Please* do not ask me.'

Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. But, alas! as we have said, Mrs. Middleton's frame of mind had changed too, and she was angry with herself for having shown weakness, and with the child for having noticed it.

She thought, too, that Nina's emotion rose from the sense of being defeated, and she eagerly seized upon the temporary advantage it gave her. She turned round, and spoke sharply, harshly—showed plainly that she looked upon their relative positions as those of task-master and slave, and laid down her commands accordingly. It was the first time she had been thwarted so resolutely in her life, and she was determined it should be the last.

Nina's spirit was roused too. She answered angrily and disrespectfully. The outward covering of good behaviour was thrown off, and Mrs. Middleton realised that she had really no power or influence over the girl whatever.

In that galling moment she learnt what an obedience is worth which is not founded on religion, love, or veneration. It was, as has been predicted, war to the knife between mother and daughter. Mrs. Middleton felt she had failed, and was at her wit's end. Stung with mortification in addition to all other feelings, she completely lost all control over herself. 'Once for all, and for the last time,' she cried, 'will you obey me or will you not?'

'I cannot promise,' the girl answered firmly.

'Then go out of my sight this instant!' And Nina turned, and went.

CHAPTER XIX.

NINA.

On the night of the county ball Nina had been awakened by the wheels of the carriage that brought her father and mother home. All the day preceding she had been unable to divest herself of the idea that Totty was worse; not, as she told herself, on account of what she had overheard in the wood, but because he really seemed to her to cough more, and to be weaker and more languid than usual.

Her room was hot, and she got up, and opened her door. It was then that she heard Totty crying and coughing; and after listening for a few minutes, she made up her mind to go and see what was the matter; for she remembered that Wilson was away, and that Totty was not much accustomed to the nursery-maid. She was surprised and alarmed, when she reached the nursery-door, to find it open, and to hear voices and see lights in the room; but her astonishment increased when, peeping in, she saw her mother sitting by the bed. Puzzled and frightened, she withdrew for a minute, but soon returned to try and discover what was going on.

She took in the state of affairs in a little while, and she saw how necessary, for Totty's sake, her presence and assistance were; but she could not at first make up her mind to go in. Concern for him, however, overcame, as we have seen, every other feeling.

As long as she was employed in soothing the boy, she had not thought much about her mother; but the moment he was asleep, a sudden fit of nervous shyness had seized her, and she had fled away, regaining her room with a beating heart. She had jumped hastily into bed, and had fallen asleep, dreaming that her mother was pursuing her.

Totty's languor and cough, when she visited him next morning, had impressed her more than it had Mrs. Middleton, and her anxiety quite prevented her attending to her lessons. In the midst of a struggle between French history and fresh fears, her mother's message had reached her. She had presented herself before her with some trepidation; the summons was so unusual. She puzzled much over what could be wanted of her, but concluded she was to be lectured for her conduct of the night before.

Her mother's first words had softened her directly. She had realised that Mrs. Middleton shared her anxiety about Totty, and had felt more drawn towards her than she had ever done before. But as the conversation went on, other and less pure feelings had been aroused. Still, through it all, breaking forth every now and then, between the dark clouds of dissension, she had recognised the gleams of her mother's newly-awakened love for

Totty. Then, too, she had been moved with surprise, mingled with a kind of pity, when she saw how overcome Mrs. Middleton was at the contrast between Mervyn's love for his mother and her own indifference.

She had so keenly realised herself, since Mervyn's arrival, the great want of love in their home, that she was half sorry for her mother when she saw she going to realise it too. She would have been glad to obey her if she could, but she was too honest to promise what she knew she should not perform.

Totty must be considered first; she *could* not desert him. It was no use her promising not to see him. She knew that at the first sound of his cry, or at the mere thought of his lying awake, frightened at every sound, she should no more be able to keep away from him than she could prevent the wind blowing in her face. Earnestly she had spoken words to this effect, as we have seen; hoping that her mother, who seemed really touched by Totty's condition, would see it in the same light as herself. But her appeal had failed, and then, alas! had come upon her the change wrought by her mother's harshness and outbreak of temper.

Nina had broken out then altogether. Her mother's words and manner had goaded her to madness, and she had given vent to words of whose import and violence she was hardly aware, till her return, after her summary dismissal, to the calm of the school-room.

Sitting at her desk and musing over all that had passed, she was able to think of the conversation more calmly. She would have been more sorry or more frightened at

its result if concern for Totty had not been occupying her mind so entirely.

As the day wore on, she accused herself of not having done all she might on his behalf. Why had she not tried more to inspire her mother with her own fears? Why had she not told her of the conversation she had overheard in the garden, and boldly asked her if it were true? And why had she irritated her mother into laying this command upon her? For in that light she regarded her mother's prohibition, and as such she felt she must try to obey it. She had not promised; no, a promise was too binding. Her word once given, she would not have been able to retract. But she was going to try and act up to her mother's injunction, if possible, by doing all in her power to keep away from Totty that night. So, as soon as Mervyn was gone down to dessert, she went straight to her bed-room, undressed, and got into bed.

But she had not lain down long before a sort of terror came over her—a terror of the darkness, a terror of the howling of the wind without, a terror of every little sound within; a nameless terror, a shapeless, causeless fear. She had sometimes had it before, but never so strong as this. She generally fought against it; but to-night her nerves were unstrung by all she had been through, and she could not cope with it as usual. It was this, in her, that enabled her to feel so much for Totty in his nervous fears and fancies. She never laughed, but felt for him sincerely, when he sometimes told her a black man had peeped at him from between

the curtains, or that a great big dog had come and sat down close to his bed.

So, because she was thus restless herself, she feared he might be restless too. Because she was suffering from imaginary terrors, she feared he might be suffering too. How that roaring noise of the wind in the chimney would frighten him! And his bed was so near it, too! The restless desire to see and console him came upon her with over-mastering power, and nine o'clock found her stealing along the passage, lamp in hand.

Totty was asleep; but he seemed to her to breathe with such difficulty that she bent over him to listen, her lips nearly touching him as she did so. When she raised her head again, she became aware that she was not alone in the room. In the dim light she saw a figure sitting by one of the other beds; and in that figure she recognised—her mother!

. . . . . .

Very few and stern were the words that fell from Mrs. Middleton's lips. She did not speak at all till they got into the passage; and then she told her daughter that she had not believed it possible she would be guilty of so flagrant an act of disobedience, but had stationed herself in the nursery to see. That she should for the future provide against the repetition of such a breach of her commands. That sure and certain means should be adopted to ensure an observance of her orders; and that in the meantime Nina was to consider herself in disgrace, and not to attempt to speak to, or hold any communication with her mother on any pretence whatsoever.

Mrs. Middleton then disappeared down the passage, and Nina went into her own room.

It was a very wearied little being that sank down upon the bed. Exhausted she was, physically and mentally. She had hardly heard what her mother was saying; the words had fallen on her ear without her taking in how much they contained. For she could think of nothing but Totty. She was sure she was not mistaken about him; certain that he was not so well. His breathing seemed to her to come in jerks, and he looked, even in his sleep, so very ill. She was sure he ought to be shown to a doctor. To Nina, a doctor was an infallible power that stood between sickness and danger. In her present state of nerves and feeling, the idea took hold of her with extraordinary force. When she woke the next morning, the same idea filled her mind. If only he were shown to a doctor, she should feel safe and happy. But how was she to get it done?

Her mother was fully occupied with the county ball party, not yet dispersed; and was not likely to pay another visit to the nursery. Her temporary anxiety about Totty was, Nina knew, completely allayed by his improved appearance the morning before; and, probably, by finding him sleeping quietly in the evening. But, then, she had not bent over him and heard that dreadful jerky breathing. Wilson would not very likely notice it either, and would put down his languor and paleness to the sleeplessness of Monday night. Besides, poor little Totty had cried 'Wolf' too often

for Wilson to be likely to take alarm. All, then, depended upon herself; and her whole heart was set on accomplishing her object. Probably she would not have been so alive to Totty's condition, had it not been for what she had overheard. His appearance, when she went for a minute into the nursery, only confirmed her in her resolution. Wilson was not there, or perhaps Nina would have tried to inspire the woman with her own fears. All the morning long she was trying to shape a plan, but it was very difficult to know how to set about it. She half thought, in her desperation, of going straight to her mother. But then she remembered that she was in disgrace, and had been forbidden to approach her on any pretence whatsoever. Besides, the futility of offering advice to Mrs. Middleton could not but occur to her. She passed a restless morning, and by luncheon-time could not hold her head up. Unfortunately she saw nothing of Mervyn, so she could not relieve herself by consulting with him.

Colonel Middleton, full of his new idea that his nephew was too much cooped up, had sent him out rabbiting with the keeper, and there was no chance of his return till dusk. Her luncheon was, by her mother's orders, sent up to her in the school-room, and Madame, realising that something was wrong, dared not be lenient where Mrs. Middleton was severe; though she was alarmed at the girl's appearance, and felt sure she was ill. She asked no questions, but she took it upon herself to forbid Nina's going out that

afternoon, and begged her to lie down and rest while she and Cecily were taking their walk. So the child was left alone in the school-room to her own sad thoughts. Rest was out of the question. The body could not rest while the mind was so unquiet. She told herself, as she sat there, musing, that she was doing nothing for Totty; that the afternoon was wearing on, and that every moment was precious. She tortured herself by the thought that the days were getting very short, that the night would soon be here, and that then it would be more difficult to send for the doctor.

'If I am to do it at all,' she said at last, out loud, I must do it at once. But *what* can I do?'

She got up and walked restlessly up and down the room. Suddenly it came into her mind, as a last resource, that she would make an appeal to her father. It must, indeed, have been a resolution born of despair; but once taken, she hesitated no more.

She left the school-room, went straight down to the smoking-room, and knocked at the door. There was no answer, so she opened the door, and peeped in. The room was empty, and a fear came into her mind that he was already gone out, and that she was too late. She went hastily into the hall, to see if his hat were missing. But all his hats were there, and his great-coat, gloves, and riding-whip put ready. He was evidently going for a ride, and had not yet started It was nearly half-past three by the hall clock, so that if he were going at all he would go soon. Would it be

best to waylay him in the hall, or to return to the smoking-room? He would be sure to go in there the last thing to fetch his cigars, and it would be a better hiding-place than the hall. So the child retraced her steps, and, fearful lest some one else might by chance come in and find her there, she hid herself behind a sofa near the window. Putting her head against it and stretching out her tired little limbs, she closed her weary eyes; and while she thought she was listening to every sound that might indicate his approach, slumber stole gently over her, and bore her away from her present anxieties.

With her hands folded across her chest, her long, dark eyelashes sweeping her cheek, and contrasting with its deadly paleness—white as a beautiful marble statue, and almost as motionless—she awaited her father's coming.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STORM.

Colonel Middleton was sadly out of a job that day, and cast about for some employment. He strolled into his wife's boudoir, where she was writing letters for the afternoon post, and pulled down the blinds, saying that the sun was ruining the carpet. He then pulled them up again, as the sun went behind a cloud, and Mrs. Middleton complained of the darkness. Then he discovered, or thought he discovered, that the blind was out of order, and that the springs didn't go quite right; so he pulled it up and down, rapidly and with the utmost violence for some minutes, making a most horrible noise.

Mrs. Middleton, fortunately for her, was called away in the middle.

He then rang for the butler, and indignantly asked him *who* was in the habit of pulling down these blinds, because it was evident that *that* person did not know how to do it. The butler was of opinion that it was in all probability the housemaid, upon which he was commissioned instantly to summon her to her master's presence. The housemaid naturally repudiated the idea

of not being mistress of that simple machinery, and visited the blame on the under-housemaid.

But Colonel Middleton was not particular; he only wanted someone on whom to vent his grievance; and she underwent a lecture, of ten minutes or so, on the art of pulling up blinds, for which I am afraid she was anything but grateful. That little occupation over, and the housemaid dismissed, Colonel Middleton discovered a miniature blot of ink on the wall behind one of the writing-tables; and determined to trace it to its source.

His great desire on these occasions was not so much to cure the evil as to find out its perpetrator; and he instantly attacked the footman, who happened at that moment to come in with the coals.

He discoursed to him for some time on the necessity of care in dipping his pen into the ink when sitting at that particular writing-table; as ink was so very likely to be spurted on to the wall behind.

'It only wants a little care,' he urged; 'the commonest care would prevent it.'

The footman listened respectfully, coal-scuttle in hand; but as he was innocent of writing his letters in the drawing-room, Colonel Middleton's remarks did not fall upon his ear with that power to which such eloquence was entitled.

Pleased, however, with the sound of his own voice, and having his hand well in, Colonel Middleton now made some remarks on the want of brightness of the coal-scuttle, and had some valuable hints to offer on the scouring and cleaning of the same.

But no servant could stand being found fault with for the neglected duties of a fellow-servant; and the footman hastily reminded his master that cleaning and scouring were not in his department: and referred him to a certain 'Ann,' who seemed likely to prove the delinquent.

But this was a matter of detail, above which Colonel, Middleton's mind soared.

'I know, I know, my good fellow, I'm not blaming *you*. I am only just *saying*, etc., etc., etc.;' upon which he launched into a still longer dissertation on household duties; till the footman, becoming desperate, suggested fetching the said 'Ann,' that she might bear the brunt of the remarks upon her short-comings. But Colonel Middleton did not at all care to confront the trembling form of Ann; and having come to the end of his tether he dismissed the subject and the footman at the same moment.

Left alone in the boudoir, he strayed towards his wife's writing-table, and began reading some notes and letters he found lying there. They were evidently, in his opinion, old, and not worth keeping; for he began tearing up one or two, and gathering the scraps into a neat little heap.

His wife came in, in the middle.

'My dear Lydia,' he said, 'how very untidy your writing-table is. Such an accumulation of old notes I never saw.'

'Oh! please Rowley, leave them alone; what *have* you been tearing up?'

'Only notes that might have been burnt long ago. I can't think why you keep them after they have been answered.'

'But how do you know they *have* been answered? I wish you would not do these things without consulting me. I do believe you have torn up the very one I was just answering. Yes!' she went on, advancing to the table, and hastily turning over the torn papers, 'yes! *that* you have. There it is, torn to shreds. That is Lady Drewe's writing; and it was an invitation to go there next month, and I haven't a notion what day she asked us for. Really it is very tiresome!'

Colonel Middleton felt rather small, and did not quite know how to defend himself.

'Well, you will be the sufferer,' said Mrs. Middleton, biting her lips to keep down her irritation, 'for you will lose your shooting.'

Colonel Middleton was always a little amused to see his wife in a rage, and pretended to be provokingly indifferent; but the incident put an end to his 'grievance-hunting' for that day, and he went off to the smoking-room. He walked in whistling, and stood in front of the fire, debating in his own mind what he would do next. As he stood there, he fancied he heard a sound of breathing. It was quite soft, but still audible, and very regular. He looked about, but saw no means of accounting for it. Still he went on, and he instituted a search; and, to his surprise, came upon a little figure, evidently in hiding, lying asleep on the floor, near the window.

'Nina!' he exclaimed.

But the worn-out child did not stir. He bent down over her.

'Nina! are you asleep?'

He touched her hair admiringly: 'What a handsome little creature she is!'

Nina started up with a face of terror.

'Is he worse?' she exclaimed.

'Who?' laughed Colonel Middleton.

'Totty,' she answered, looking round her, bewildered.

'My dear little girl, I am afraid you are not very well to-day, or else you are dreaming. There is nothing the matter with Totty.'

'Oh yes, papa, there is!' she exclaimed; 'I am sure there is! I don't think mamma *can* know, or she would send for the doctor. Papa, *will* you please ask her to send for him!'

'Get up, my dear child, and sit in the arm-chair. I don't quite understand all this.'

Nina seated herself in the arm-chair, and began to pour out all that she had meant to say.

Colonel Middleton saw, by her incoherency, and the nervous twist of her hands, that she was very much agitated, and got puzzled, not seeing any sufficient cause.

'Did you come here to tell me all this?'

'Yes, papa.'

'And why?'

'I thought you would ask mamma to send for the doctor.'

Colonel Middleton looked much bored.

'Oh, my dear, I never interfere. If your mother and the nurses saw any occasion, she would of course have sent for him. Her not having done so proves there is no cause for alarm. Don't you see?'

'Oh, but papa, I don't think she *can* know! He looks so ill, so dreadfully ill!' And Nina burst into tears.

Colonel Middleton had all a man's horror of tears, He began to walk up and down the room.

'Oh, this will never do! You are nervous, Nina, or over-tired, or something. I think it is you, and not Totty, that requires a doctor. Come with me to your mother, and we will see if she can't give you a little sal volatile, or something.'

But Nina shrank back.

'Oh no!' she exclaimed; 'I can't go to mamma. She won't see me.'

'Not see you!'

'She has forbidden me to come near her.'

'Why, what naughty things have you been doing?' said Colonel Middleton, patronisingly, 'playing at fox-hunting in the school-room, talking to the coachman out riding, or what other enormity?'

The child was incapable of answering. She only shook her head.

'So you want to make me the scapegoat, eh? I couldn't undertake to mediate between ladies, really. It's not in my line.'

'Oh, papa! I don't want you to say anything about

me, only to try and persuade her to send for the doctor for Totty.'

'But why—supposing, for the sake of the argument, that Totty was ill (which he is not)—should you think you know better than your mother and the nurses? Why, in short, should you take the matter into your hands at all? What is it to you?'

'I love him so, papa!'

The words burst from the girl's lips almost like a cry. They seemed to escape her involuntarily, and she clasped her hands together as she spoke. Her dark eyes glowed and deepened, and seemed to say how powerful to her that argument was, and how, in her mind, it explained and accounted for everything.

Her father glanced at her rather uneasily, and felt, as he had often felt before, that the girl was too much for him.

'My dear little daughter,' he said, 'you take life much too seriously. Now do listen to the advice of your father, who has lived a good many years longer than you have, and try to take things as they come. I have always done so, and found it a capital plan. Now, I will give you an excellent maxim, which I have always found most consoling: "Les choses s'arrangent!' Try and believe that other people are sure to manage matters as well, if not better, than you are. If you want a thing well done, *don't* do it yourself. Leave everything to other people. It all comes right in the end. And now run up-stairs again. A cup of tea will refresh you, and I want to get a ride before dusk.'

They stood opposite each other, these two—the easy-going, shallow father, and the suffering, sensitive child. The contrast between the two faces was very strongly marked. Earnest intensity was written on every line of hers, careless superficiality on his.

And in that moment the child recognised it; saw that what she felt he would never feel; that what she comprehended so clearly he would never, never understand.

Swift as an arrow there shot into her heart the conviction that she was wasting her time and spending her strength in vain; that she would never make more impression on him than her own footfall would make upon the shifting sand, which the next wave would efface altogether. And as the thought smote upon her, despair crept into her heart; despair which would have been mingled with contempt, if her sore heart had had room for any other feeling.

She turned away without a word, and closed the door behind her.

We need not follow the poor little thing up-stairs, nor through the evening that followed, when, as night closed in, all her fears returned with redoubled intensity. All hope of the Doctor coming was over. She went to her bed-room as soon as Mervyn had gone down to dessert. She did not communicate her anxieties to him; perhaps she feared to give them expression.

She felt so tired when she had undressed, that she lay down on the bed to rest for a few minutes before going to Totty.

It was one of those oppressive, thundery evenings,

that come sometimes in October. She was overdone by excitement and bad nights, and she fell asleep directly.

She was awakened some hours after by the roll of distant thunder. She started up, wondering what it was, and dismayed to find she had been to sleep, and that now it was too late to go to Totty. But it is not the thunder which causes such an expression of terror to come over her face. There is a sound above the distant rumble to which she listens with a beating heart. It is the loud ringing of the nursery-bell!

Again and again it peals, and it is followed by a stir and commotion in the house.

It is as she feared, then! Her worst dread is realised —Totty is taken ill; and now it is night, and the doctor is far away!

With a beating heart she springs out of bed, crying, 'Oh! why didn't they listen to me? Why wouldn't they believe what I said?'

Vague ideas of running as she was over fields and meadows to fetch him pass through her brain: who would be so fleet as she?

There is no feeling of triumph in the poor child's breast that the event has proved her right, and that she is justified in her forebodings. No—only a deadly fear. She gropes her way to the door, trembling in every limb, and grasps the handle in her shaking hand. It seems to resist, and she steadies her hand and tries again. Still she cannot open it. The handle turns, but the door will not open.

'I must have bolted it by mistake,' she exclaims im-

patiently, and she pulls nervously at the little bolt. All to no purpose; and the child is getting more and more agitated.

Suddenly a thought seems to dart into her mind, and words to which she has hitherto attached no meaning flash clear across her brain. Her mother has locked her in!

. . . . . .

This, then, is the punishment of which she spoke! this the sure and certain means she has adopted to ensure compliance with her commands!

Then a mighty tempest passed over the soul of the child, and her very being seemed shaken by the force of the passions which stirred within her. Throwing herself upon her knees, she called aloud in her fury and despair: 'Mamma! mamma! I hate you! I wish you were dead!' Crouching against the door, she hammered upon it with her hands, crying, 'Open the door! Open it, I say! Open it directly!'

A loud clap of thunder was the answer, rattling and crackling over her head till the very room seemed to shake. It was a kind of relief to the child. It seemed to express all the wild feelings which were raging in her heart—wrath, rebellion, hatred, and revenge.

The lightning flashed into the darkness of the room, revealing the little figure crouching by the door. It played about her, and she felt no fear; it flashed in her face, and she did not start or wince. The thunder hurled with her anathemas against her mother, and she flashed upon her in imagination with the lightning.

Down came the torrents of rain, beating against the window as if the very doors of heaven were opening and the waters pouring out.

It was a fearful storm; but the tempest raging without was as nothing compared with the tempest raging in the heart of the child. To her the relief of tears did not come. The fury of the tempest was spent, for the danger is over when the rain comes. Not so with the child. The storm of her fury was still raging, for the danger is not over till the tears come.

And *what* is to bring them to her eyes? Those eyes are hard and dry; the little heart is like a stone, and the hot parched lips have no sign of softening in them. But is anything too hard for the Lord? He who smote the Stony Rock that the waters gushed out, and ran in the dry places, will soften the stony heart; and 'Rivers of water gush from mine eyes' will He make the proud lips say.

He who rides upon the whirlwind and directs the storm—who rebuked the raging of the winds and waves, so that they ceased, and there was a great calm—will direct the whirlwind of anger, and say to the surging waves of passion, 'Peace! be still!'

Exhausted for a moment, the child lay quiet; and there came into her mind, she knew not wherefore, the memory of Mervyn kneeling by Totty's bedside. Then the thought of the moonlight on the water, and the accents of Mervyn's voice.

'In heaven,' it seemed to repeat, 'they all love every-

one, and you love so few. Sometimes I think you will never understand . . . .'

'Forgive us our trespasses,' it said again, 'as we forgive them . . . .'

'Nina, why wouldn't you join with me? . . . .'

The peace of the well-remembered scene, and the thoughts of love and heaven connected with it, came upon the child as she lay, like a cool hand laid upon a burning forehead; like oil on the tempestuous waters; like the chime of church bells heard through the howling of the wind on a wild wet night.

It seemed like a whisper from another world; something which she, in her fury of feeling, had nothing to do with; which she was not pure enough to look upon, or holy enough to understand.

Opposed to the atmosphere of wrath and hatred in which she was now plunged, it seemed one of such peace and love, and it seemed so far away! Heaven itself could not seem holier, since love is heaven, and heaven is peace and love. Nor could heaven itself seem more far away!

Given up to all wicked feelings, she felt herself, as it were, cut off from heaven, with its boundless universal love, a prey to hatred and revenge, only fit now to look from a distance on that scene of peace and purity. So do we picture to ourselves the Lost looking from their Place of Darkness, upon the Heaven which might have been theirs!

Struck with horror at the contrast, and longing to escape from so terrible a condition, she cried aloud in

her desire to be saved from herself: 'Mervyn! Mervyn!' Thus do we ever seek first earthly comfort and support; flying ever first to our brother man; forgetting that we have a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, and that He is ever near.

For all answer came into her mind again—heaven-sent—the same words as before.

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them . . . .'

'Nina, why would you not join with me? . . . .'

'I will! indeed I will!'

'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us . . . Oh God! help me not to feel so wicked! Help me! . . . .'

Then came a pause in the storm, both within and without; and there was a calm. The silence that reigned made a sound in the passage audible; and the child listened intently.

Was it a voice? . . . . It was . . . . It must be! . . . . She listened intently again. The voice was hardly above a whisper, but the voice said 'Nina!'

'Mervyn!' she exclaimed; 'oh, Mervyn, is that you?'

'Yes, Nina, I've been here some time; but you were never quiet a moment, and I couldn't make you hear.'

'Oh, Mervyn,' said Nina, 'unlock the door!'

'Hush, Nina. I can't. The key is not here. Listen to what I am going to say. The doctor has come, and he is in Totty's room.'

'Oh, thank God! thank God!' she exclaimed, and the glad relief of tears came at last. 'It will be all right now.'

'Don't cry so, Nina dear. I will go and see if I can find out more. Keep quiet till I come back. And please don't cry.'

No need to tell her to keep quiet now; the storm-tempest has spent its fury, and the wicked feelings have fled away, dispelled by the very sound of his voice The tears came raining down after he had left her, cooling the burning eyes, soothing and refreshing as a soft summer shower. Gentler feelings came over her, feelings of repentance and contrition as she sat there, quiet, save for a little sobbing sigh now and then—waiting for the first indication of his return.

The confusion in the house got greater; doors opened and shut, footsteps passed and re-passed; but still the little figure remained motionless as a statue; unheeding and unmoved. A great calm had come upon the soul of the child. The doctor was there; what she had so striven to bring about had been accomplished; what she had so despaired of had been brought to pass; the doctor was there. That was all that mattered now.

Mervyn came back at last, whispering that he could find out nothing; but that everybody was up and about in the house; and his aunt shut up with the doctor in Totty's room. Then he went away.

All, then, that could be done was being done, and everyone's mind full of Totty. Her own individual presence could be no great good. So she sat there calm and content; satisfied, even thankful.

'Thank God,' she whispered every now and then, and that whisper was heartfelt prayer.

Her heart was thrilling with a nameless feeling, half pride, half joy, that Totty should thus be recognised as an object worthy the anxiety and attention of the whole household. 'Everyone in the house is up,' she repeated, half-aloud; 'everyone is thinking about Totty.'

A long time elapsed. Anxiety was beginning to creep into her heart again, when the sudden sound of a carriage driving away completely upset her, and she started to her feet with a great cry, and a sudden chill at her heart.

'He is going because he can do no good!' she exclaimed, wringing her hands, and running to the window. Her suspicion, alas! was fully confirmed when she caught sight of the carriage vanishing in the distance; and from that moment hope fled.

Then came the longing, so mercifully withheld before, to see him—if only for once more; to be with him, to hear his voice again; and she flung herself on her knees and sobbed, 'Oh God, pity me! oh God! help me! By some way or other take me to him and let me see him again!'

Her face was hidden in her hands, and her ear was deaf to any sound but the cry she was uttering. So she did not hear the unlocking of the door, nor see that someone had entered; till a hand was laid upon her shoulder, and a voice said 'Come.'

Raising her head, she saw her mother standing before her, and knew that her prayer was answered. There was something in her mother's white face and

shaking hands that checked the words which trembled on the child's lips, and she answered her never a word. But, as in a dream, she rose and followed her; through the familiar passages, into the familiar nursery, just as she was, in her little white night-gown, with her dark hair streaming.

As in a dream, she was conscious of the many forms in the room, of the weeping nurses, of the unwonted presence of her father; but she seemed to have no concern with anyone or anything but Totty. She thought of nothing, saw nothing, but him.

Everyone drew back to allow her to pass; and she moved on alone to the little white bed, where the still little figure was lying. The world seemed to retire, and to leave the brother and sister alone. She knelt down by his side and clasped his thin little hands.

'Totty,' she whispered.

The blue eyes opened, and a faint smile broke over the colourless little face.

'Nina,' he just managed to breathe, 'kiss me, Nina.'

And as she kissed him—he died.

CHAPTER XXI.

MAGDALEN'S RETURN.

LADY WARDLAW to Colonel Middleton.—'Charlie has been telegraphed for to Ireland, and went off at once. I am coming straight to you, and hope to be at Granton Thursday morning.'

Such was the missive which was put into Mervyn's hand the next day, as he sat by himself in the little study, writing to his mother. It had arrived late the evening before; but in the confusion of events no one had remembered to inform him of its contents.

'Colonel Middleton told me to bring it direct to you, sir,' said the butler, as he handed the paper, 'and to tell you her ladyship will be here in a very few minutes.'

Mervyn opened the paper listlessly. Sick at heart, the boy felt very indifferent to its contents. His only feeling was vexation at the interruption, for he wanted to relieve his full heart by pouring out to his mother a recital of the sad events of the last few days. 'Her ladyship' conveyed no idea to him. He had not a notion of whom the butler was speaking. Slowly he opened the telegram, and slowly he read the contents. But he did not take it in. He read it again, and then

again, and stared at it. Suddenly his colour deepened, and he put his hand up to his head as if to steady his brain, and to try to understand what he was reading. *What* did the telegram say?

By degrees the meaning dawned — just dawned slightly. He gathered that she was coming; but why, or how, or when, he could not at first comprehend.

'She is coming!' he said softly to himself; 'she is coming here!'

Still he could not quite take it in, or realise all at once what those few words really expressed.

'She is coming on Thursday,' he said, presently; 'on Thursday morning. Thursday! that is how many days off? To-day is . . . why to-day is Thursday!' he suddenly exclaimed; 'she is coming to-day! to-day!!'

We must forgive him if, at that moment, all thoughts of the sorrowing household fled away. He had room in his heart for nothing but a joy so great, so boundless, that his whole face changed, radiated with a sudden light; and he sprang to his feet with a sound which would have been a shout if something like a sob had not mingled with it.

Sorrow and death, which had been weighing upon his young spirit so heavily, lost their depressing power, and from their depths he rose into the height and breadth of a happiness that seemed to lift him out of himself. It was almost too much for him. She was coming. She would be here almost directly. Henceforth, he would have nothing to regret, nothing to long for.

'She will be here!' he told himself; 'she will stand in this very room! I shall see her; I, with my own eyes!'

And while fancy is thus painting the scene to the heart of the child, the picture is a reality; for Magdalen *is* there; she *is* standing in the room; and if he only turns his head, he will see her.

No need for her to try and attract his attention for fear of startling him; no need for her to still her beating heart, and softly to pronounce his name! He was conscious of her presence directly—knew the very rustle of her gown and the sound of her light footfall—*felt* she was there, and shaded his eyes with his hand before he turned them on her, as if he feared to be dazzled by the sight of what he had so longed for.

Then, too, suddenly, came the fear and the misgiving, Would she be changed? Would there be some alteration? Would it be quite the mother he remembered—whose picture fancy had been painting all the time?

But when he really *saw* the sweet face, when his glance rested on the well-known features and the familiar smile—when he met the eyes that were shining and glowing with love for him—all his doubts and fears vanished. He threw up his hands with a glad cry, and went straight into her arms without a word. Nor did he find voice to express his joy and welcome till he felt her arms enfold him, and her soft kisses rain on his cheek. Then, and not till then, did his feelings find vent in a tumult of love and rejoicing!

. . . . . .

For a whole hour they have been together, and still he has not exhausted all he has to say. She is sitting with his hand in hers, gazing at him as at something for which her eyes have long been searching, listening while he pours forth what he has to tell.

The bare outline of what had happened she had heard at the station, and she had seen her brother for a few moments in the hall; but beyond that she knew nothing. Very few words had passed between her and Colonel Middleton. He had brought her at once to the door of Mervyn's sitting-room, and had left her to enter alone, while he went to tell his wife of her arrival.

So that Mervyn's explanations were fully needed. He gave her an account of all that had happened, from the night of the county ball. He enlarged upon the state of affairs between mother and daughter, and painted a vivid picture of the lovelessness of the Granton atmosphere, and of how he had suffered from it.

His mother drew him to her when he spoke of these things, softly whispering, 'It is all over now;' and Mervyn put his head on her shoulder, with a delicious feeling of security and peace. But his mind was more full of the recent events than of his own bygone troubles, and he returned to the subject of Nina.

'I have not seen her this morning,' he concluded. 'I peeped into her room, but she was fast asleep.'

'Is no one with her?' asked Lady Wardlaw. 'Has not your aunt been to her?'

'She never goes into Nina's room, mother.'

'But has the poor child no one looking after her? not even the nurse or governess?'

'Oh no, mother! I don't think Nina would like it; she is not very . . . not exactly nice to the nurse and governess, you see. I think they would be afraid to go to her.'

'But it seems so sad the child should be alone in her grief.'

'She is asleep, mother.'

'Yes, dear; but fancy what a lonely waking.'

Just then a message came that Mrs. Middleton would like to see Lady Wardlaw; and Magdalen rose directly. She noticed Mervyn's look of disappointment.

'I am sorry to leave you so soon, darling; but we must not be selfish, you and I. Other people want us just now, as much as we want each other, don't they?'

'Oh no!' said Mervyn promptly. But he recovered himself directly, and said, 'Yes, mother; and I'll go to Nina and sit by her till she wakes.'

'Do, darling, if you think she would like it.'

And then Magdalen followed the maid to Mrs. Middleton's apartments, and Mervyn stole softly into Nina's darkened room. He had grown so accustomed to her sympathy in his pleasures and his pains, that it seemed strange he should not be able to communicate to her the joyful news of his mother's return. He half hoped to find her awake; and as he went along he had debated within himself whether he would not wake her up to tell her. But when he stood by her bedside his mind

changed. She looked so pale and sad that he felt he was quite selfish to be glad about anything while she was so unhappy. His bright face clouded when his eyes fell upon her face. He remembered that she would wake to the memory of a sorrow as deep as his joy; and he felt that it would indeed be cruel to rouse her from her quiet sleep. For, pale and ill though she looked, she was sleeping quietly the sleep of thorough exhaustion. For the time she had forgotten her troubles. If she woke, she would remember them directly. Nothing that he could do or say could comfort her like the quiet sleep she was enjoying. What could *he* do for her, loving and willing as he was, that unconsciousness could do?

> What would *we* do for our belovèd?
> God giveth His belovèd—sleep!

So he sat quietly down by her side to wait till she should wake up herself. He did not mind waiting. He had plenty to occupy his thoughts. The sun stole in through the chinks of the closed shutters, and shone upon the two children; on the one who had got back all that he had longed for; on the other, from whom all that she had loved had been taken away. One little figure was almost as motionless as the other.

At last, with a sigh, Nina began to stir a little; and Mervyn restrained his eagerness, and hardly allowed himself to breathe, lest he should hasten her return to the consciousness of her sorrow. But in God's good providence the child's waking thoughts brought her a sense of rest and peace, to which she had long been a

stranger. Dimly came back to her the scenes of last night: the storm, and the tumult, and the passion; but, above all, was that strange new feeling of quiet and relief.

For all anxiety is over now. Never again need she start and tremble at the sound of the nursery-bell. Never again need she lie awake restless, earing he is restless too. No more anxious listening to the wind in the chimney, fearing it may be roaring near his bed. No more will he suffer from nervous fancies, from sickness, or from pain. Never again need she wrestle wildly with that haunting fear and dread. The ghost which pursued her is laid for ever, and the worst is over now. Never again need she chafe at the feeling that he is overlooked and despised. The little 'black sheep' is a white lamb now, safe in the Shepherd's arms—is a ewe lamb lying for ever and ever in the bosom of his Saviour, above. Never again need her heart beat wildly, and her jealous indignation be aroused, because *he* is not summoned to his parents' presence when the guests are assembled there. He is more highly exalted now! In his Father's presence for ever and ever, and the shining angels round! What recks he now, that his knees are feeble and his limbs powerless and weak? Has he not wings to bear him whither his Father wills him to go? . . .

No thought of self mingled with these pure feelings. Long ago Nina's self had gone out into Totty; and in her love for him she had lost sight of it.

So quietly, and almost happily, she awoke, and found Mervyn sitting by her bed.

'Mervyn!' she said, softly.

He bent over her, kissing her joyfully, but restraining his words, lest his joy should seem selfish.

'Mervyn,' she said quickly, 'let me look at your face.'

'Why?' he said, coming closer, and thinking he was cleverly hiding the joy which was shining out of his honest eyes.

'Mervyn, Aunt Magdalen has come! I am sure of it.'

'Oh, never mind!' he answered, joyously, but still trying to look grave; 'it doesn't matter a bit! I mean we won't talk about it, if you'd rather not. . . . Oh, Nina! how did you guess?' he finished, suddenly letting his delight have its vent. 'I didn't mean to tell you, really.'

'I guessed it by your face,' she answered, smiling. 'I'm so, *so* glad, Mervyn! I can never tell you how glad I am! Oh, Mervyn, how happy you must be! But why do you say you had not meant to tell me?'

And she looked wistfully at his beaming eyes. Her own glittered rather strangely, and her manner was very excited.

A more experienced person than Mervyn would have taken alarm at her appearance. He only took her hands in his, and said,

'I was afraid of being selfish.'

'Tell me all about it,' she said, rather faintly, as she tightened her hold on his hands. 'I feel too tired and

too giddy to ask you questions; and I want so much to hear.'

Mervyn instantly poured forth his tale of joy; and she listened with an excited attention.

'In thy presence is the fulness of joy,' she whispered, when he had finished. 'Is Granton like heaven now?'

Her lips quivered as she put the question.

'Oh no, Nina darling!' he said, with a sudden impulse, throwing his arms round her neck; 'how can I be quite happy when you are so miserable. If I have got my heaven, you have lost yours!'

The pain of her loss, the terrible sense of the void in her life, smote upon Nina at his words, and she gave way to a burst of bitter, bitter weeping. Clinging to Mervyn, she begged him to love her, for she had no one left to love her now! . . .

CHAPTER XXII.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER BROUGHT TOGETHER.

MEANWHILE Lady Wardlaw went straight to Mrs. Middleton's room. Her brother was just coming out, and at sight of her he closed the door behind him rather hastily, and drew her aside in the passage.

'I can't get her to cheer up at all,' he said, with a very rueful face. 'I don't know when I have seen her so cut up. Perhaps you will be more fortunate than me, being a fresh arrival. You will be able to distract her a little by telling her about your travels, and so on. Do try what you can do. And, I say, Magdalen, come to the smoking-room afterwards. Everyone went off this morning early, and I haven't a creature to speak to.'

He passed on, and Magdalen opened the door and went in.

Mrs. Middleton rose to receive her—a mere wreck, to Lady Wardlaw's eyes, of the Mrs. Middleton of three months ago. Even her manner was changed; all the decision had gone out of it. Her voice shook when she tried to speak, and the hand she held out trembled all over. In one short night the work had been done. The strong-minded, self-willed Mrs. Middleton had be-

come an unnerved, broken-down woman. A stronger than she had met and overcome her; had taken away the armour in which she trusted, and laid her powerless and defeated in the dust. She had never, as we said before, lost a child, or conceived the possibility of such a thing. But nevertheless the King of Terrors had entered her stronghold, and, heedless of her and of her will, had taken away the spoil.

In the silent watches of the night she had been forced to recognise a will stronger than her own—a strength greater, a Power before which she must bow. Nor had she known how to stand her defeat. From the moment when, roused by the bell, she had rushed to the nursery and found Totty had broken a blood-vessel, all her power of self-control had fled. Utterly unnerved, completely helpless, every maid in the house had been of greater use than she.

In her undisciplined rebellion she had broken out into reproaches first, into lamentations afterwards. She had failed utterly; failed before the whole household; her humiliation had been complete. Even the doctor had been obliged to beg Colonel Middleton to take his wife away, as her want of self-control was unnerving everyone.

In that supreme moment, too, she had realised her husband's shallowness, and turned in loathing from his superficial attempts at consolation. In her helplessness and her terror she had felt he was no prop at all; and she had longed—she who had always been more than sufficient for herself—for some strength to lean upon, some one to turn to.

Then had come to her the thought of her little daughter: the recollection of the dauntless way in which the child had withstood her to her face, sooner than promise to neglect her little brother. With Totty dying before her eyes, Mrs. Middleton had forgotten the disobedience, the irreverence, the determined opposition. She had only remembered the calmness, the fearlessness, the quiet. She had only felt that the child who could act so was a tower of strength. The very thought of the stedfast eyes and the firm little mouth had been rest to her. Vividly she had remembered the former scene in the bedroom-nursery, when the restless child had been lulled to sleep, and her own anxiety allayed, by the calm influence of the girl's presence and power. She had felt it might help her again; she had felt she must have it at any price, though she knew the price must be her own defeat. She had felt she must fetch the girl, though she knew no hand but hers could set the prisoner free. She must reverse her own decree, herself put an end to the punishment she had devised and inflicted. It was one step further into the Valley of Humiliation; but she had hardly seemed to care for that.

She was a vanquished woman: what did it matter?

So, while all were occupied with Totty, she had stolen away to Nina's room. She had thought to find the child asleep; had turned the key very softly, and entered gently, for fear of waking her too suddenly.

The little kneeling figure that had met her gaze; the face the child had turned towards her at her touch, the

calmness with which she had risen and followed her; the utter absence of all questioning, of all excitement, of all weak display of grief; the power of self-control with which she had knelt down by the bed and whispered the dying boy's name—all this had been a moving panorama before the mother's eyes ever since, making her heart thrill with a feeling half of envy and half of admiration, and causing her to regard the girl's strength, as contrasted with her own weakness, in the light of something almost superhuman.

She had been lying on the sofa in her dressing-room ever since she had been brought in hysterics from the bedroom-nursery; and her one longing all that time had been for Nina.

She wanted to learn the secret of her calmness, that she might be calm too. She wanted to learn the secret of her resignation, that she might be resigned too. Above all, she wanted some one who could feel and suffer, to sympathise and grieve with her. Her husband's remarks on the sad event that morning, and his trivial talking over the changes of plan it would entail, had driven her wild. She had seen how little the loss personally affected him, and every word he had let fall had jarred upon her. She had felt as if no one but Nina and herself had cared for the child at all. And yet she dared not send for her, dared not go to her. It was not from pride—poor woman, she was humbled to the dust now—it was positively from fear.

Such was the state of mind in which Magdalen found her when she entered the room.

Her gentle words of sympathy made Mrs. Middleton break down at first; but in a few minutes it seemed a relief to her to give an account of the poor little fellow's sudden illness and death.

There was silence between them when the recital was over.

'Magdalen,' said Mrs. Middleton, rather suddenly, at last, 'have you seen any of the children since you came?'

'Only Mervyn, dear Lydia.'

'Did he mention any of them; Cecily, or . . . . Edmund?'

'Not them; only poor little Nina.'

Mrs. Middleton got up, and began to walk restlessly up and down the room.

'What did he say about her?'

'He said he thought she was still asleep. But that is some little time ago. She may be awake now. Do you want to see her, Lydia?'

Mrs. Middleton put out her hand as if to keep the subject off, and walked up and down more restlessly than ever. That she was much agitated Lady Wardlaw could see, for her chest was heaving; and she held one hand to her heart, as if to still its beating.

'Magdalen,' she said, suddenly turning round upon her sister-in-law—and Lady Wardlaw was shocked to see the expression of anguish which was painted on her face—'Oh, Magdalen! you don't know how I long to see her, and yet I do not dare. . . . You don't know what a child that is! I have only

lately discovered it. She is full of character and determination, full of thought and affection, full of self-control, and every other noble feeling. Unhappily she has thwarted me, and I have been very severe with her. More unhappily, still, the thwarting and the severity were connected with . . . . my poor little boy. And now I feel as if she would hate me. I know she is one of those who must either love or hate; and I know she does not love me. So I am afraid . . . . yes, Magdalen, *afraid* to see her. I could not—my heart is too sad and sore—see hatred in the eyes of my own child. Eyes,' she added, half to herself, 'that *can* look so different. I *could* not be reproached, triumphed over, despised. . . .'

'Oh, hush, dear! hush!' said Magdalen, much shocked. 'Indeed, Lydia, I do not think you can know what you are saying. The poor child is stupefied with grief. It seems to me quite cruel to leave her alone. Won't you come to her, and see?'

'No, no,' said Mrs. Middleton; 'I cannot, indeed I cannot. Besides, I am sure she would not like it. You don't understand her . . . . or me. How should you? You and Mervyn are so different.'

'Dear Lydia,' remonstrated Magdalen, 'you will tire yourself so if you walk up and down like that. Pray sit down.'

Mrs. Middleton sat down.

'You have heard all this before, Magdalen?'

'Yes, Lydia.'

'From Mervyn?'

'From Mervyn.'

'Where is Mervyn now?'

'In Nina's room.'

'Nina is very fond of Mervyn.'

'So I fancy; and Mervyn is very fond of her.'

'It is selfish of me to keep you away from Mervyn, Magdalen. You must be longing to be with him, I am sure. Pray do not stay here.'

'Well, I will go to him for a few minutes, and then I will see how Nina is, and bring you word. Shall I?'

'I should be very grateful.'

Magdalen left the room, and proceeded down the passage. Just outside Nina's room she met Mervyn, who came bounding up to her, whispering eagerly: 'Mother, *do* go in and see Nina. I was coming to fetch you.'

'But, my darling, do you think she would like it? You forget I am quite a stranger to her.'

For all answer Mervyn pushed open the door, and his mother was obliged to go in. And then she found herself alone with Nina.

The girl was lying just as Mervyn had left her, after soothing her burst of grief. She looked very ill; her eyes were unnaturally large and bright, and had dark rings under them. Though the general aspect of her face was of a deadly pallor, there was a slight tinge of crimson on each cheek. She started up when she saw her aunt, and held out her hands without speaking. Magdalen took them both; they were burning hot. She

was much alarmed at the girl's appearance, and at the excitement of her words and manner.

'Aunt Magdalen,' she said, earnestly, 'don't let Mervyn stay here; don't leave him here without you. He is not happy here. I can't tell you how miserable he has been sometimes without you.'

'No, dear,' said Magdalen, soothingly; 'I won't leave him any more. But shan't you be sorry to lose him?'

'Oh yes! Oh yes! But that doesn't matter.'

'Everything matters that makes you happy, my child.'

'I shall never be happy again,' she said, and she burst into tears.

'And yet,' said Magdalen, gently, 'you would not call back that sweet little fellow from his happiness in Heaven to the life of weakness and suffering he led here? He would not wish to come; he is happier now than he has ever been before. You would not if you could, dear child, would you?'

'Oh no! Oh no!' exclaimed Nina.

'God loved him so, dear, He wanted to have him with Himself. You can trust him to his Father, Nina, who loves him even more than you.'

'Aunt Magdalen,' said Nina, passionately, '*you* would have loved him, wouldn't you? *You* wouldn't have minded his being weak and sickly. *You* wouldn't have thought more of the others because they were stronger than him? *You* wouldn't have been ashamed of him, and have thought him the black sheep of the family, and despised him? If Mervyn had been like him, *you*

wouldn't have done all this? I mean even if you had had other children, stronger and finer than him?'

'God forbid, dear,' said Magdalen, wondering what the girl was driving at. 'Do you not know that the weakest and least prosperous child is always the one a mother holds most dear?'

'*She* never did,' exclaimed Nina.

'*Who*, dear?' asked Magdalen, bewildered.

'Mamma!' she cried; 'she despised him, she was ashamed of him; I don't believe she will be sorry he is dead.'

Magdalen was inexpressibly shocked. Matters between the mother and daughter seemed more hopeless than she had expected. She was bewildered, too. Coming fresh from Mrs. Middleton, in the abandonment of her grief, the girl's statement seemed so contradictory. She could not help feeling they were misunderstanding each other, and that all might be set right between them. But the most prominent idea in her mind was that Nina's state should be put before Mrs. Middleton at once. She was quite sure that the child was much shaken in nerves and in body, and she felt she might very likely be on the brink of a nervous fever, or some such illness.

No doubt it was her duty to call her sister-in-law's attention to it without delay. The mother and daughter must be brought together, and no weak fear of agitating the former must prevent her instantly giving the alarm. But she hardly liked to leave Nina alone, even while she went to Mrs. Middleton's room on the other side of

the house. So she went to the door, and called Mervyn. He came directly.

'Stay with Nina,' she whispered, 'and tell her, if you have an opportunity, how unhappy her mother is, and how she is longing to see her.'

But on her way she called to a servant in the hall, and gave orders that the doctor should be sent for at once. She found Mrs. Middleton sitting as she had left her; but she looked up eagerly at her entrance, and said, 'Well?'

'I have nothing good to tell you, Lydia,' she said very gravely. 'I think Nina is very ill, and I don't think you ought to lose a moment in going to see her.'

Her gentle womanly heart smote her as she uttered the words; but foreign as it was to her nature to inflict pain, she felt in this instance that it was the only thing to be done. But she was not prepared for the effect of her words on Mrs. Middleton.

'Ill!' she cried, starting to her feet, and hastily throwing a shawl over her shoulders. 'She is dying, Magdalen! I see it in your face. Oh, my God! am I to lose two children in one day? Take me to her. Oh Magdalen, take me quickly.'

And she put her hand on her sister-in-law's shoulder for support.

Magdalen answered gently: 'Believe me, Lydia, no. She is not so bad as that. Only ill enough to require a mother's care and attention.'

'She shall have both,' exclaimed Mrs. Middleton. 'I

would lay down my life for her. I will do anything and everything I can to . . .'

As she was speaking, the door slowly opened, and Mervyn entered, leading Nina by the hand. Her eyes, glowing with mingled feelings, sought her mother's face.

'Mervyn has been telling me,' she began faintly, but at sight of that mother, so wan-looking, so altered, she stopped short.

The swollen eyes, the haggard look, the weak, nervous motion of the hands, the change altogether, filled the child with feelings which deprived her of speech. Her mother stopped short, too, in what she was saying, and stepped back just a little. But neither removed their eyes from the other's face. Each recognised in the other the presence of the same sacred common cause of sorrow, and the change which that sorrow had effected. Each recognised that from the other every trace of antagonism, pride, resistance, and self-will, had fled. Neither spoke, but both understood. Pity, the mainspring of all that was tender and holy in the girl, sprang up in her heart at the sight. Anxiety and love, so long unknown, woke up in the mother's breast, and pervaded every line of her face. . . .

Very quietly Magdalen led Mervyn away, and closed the door behind her.

So no eye but God's saw the meeting between mother and daughter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BACK AT GLEN-MERVYN.

'DOESN'T it seem funny, mother,' said Mervyn, 'that all this time I have never heard *why* you came back so suddenly? Your last letter said not till December. I have never had a minute to ask you till now.'

It was evening, and he was sitting in his mother's bed-room. She was lying on the sofa, and he was in his old position on the floor, with his head against her, and her hand in his.

Magdalen answered that a sudden Fenian outbreak on Lord Wardlaw's estates in Ireland had resulted in the murder of his agent, and that his immediate presence there had been necessary. Summoned by telegram, he had started directly.

As she spoke, she fancied she felt Mervyn shrink a little into himself, but he said nothing; and she could not see his face as she lay. His silence did not encourage her to pursue the conversation, so she did not continue it. She merely remarked that Lord Wardlaw would join them at Glen-Mervyn as soon as he was able, but that she did not know when that would be; and then she wished the boy a fond good-night, and begged him

to get to bed as quickly as possible, so as to have a good sleep after the exciting events of the day. They had both, certainly, been through a good deal of agitation. Nina, after the meeting with her mother, had broken down altogether, and the doctor, on his arrival, had declared her to be in a very anxious state. She had never left her mother's sofa, where she had first been laid. The whole nervous system had seemed unstrung, and her physical strength exhausted. She had got a chill, too, and towards evening had become feverish and disposed to wander. The doctor's orders that she should be kept perfectly quiet, and not confused by the sight of different faces, were most stringent; and the younger children were to be sent away, and the house kept as free of noise and bustle as possible.

Under these circumstances Lady Wardlaw had settled to leave Granton the next morning, taking Mervyn with her. It was useless his staying, as far as Nina was concerned, since the doctor desired that only one person should go into her room besides the maid.

Mrs. Middleton had at once declared it her intention to be that one, and had never left the girl's side since the doctor's visit. It was not very likely that poor little Nina would often be conscious enough to notice Mervyn's absence, so Magdalen had no scruples about taking him away. Lady Wardlaw could not help feeling that it was a providential arrangement that the mother and daughter should thus be left alone; and fervently hoped that anxiety and care on the one side would hereafter draw forth gratitude on the other, and pave the way to love and confidence on both.

Thus suddenly Mervyn's exile came to an end; and early the next morning he left the scene of his varied experiences, where he had unconsciously and indirectly been the means of effecting so much.

They went straight to London, where they remained for some little time. During their stay they had daily telegrams and letters from Granton, which were on the whole more cheering than otherwise. Magdalen also had satisfactory accounts from her husband of the progress of his affairs in Ireland, and he seemed likely to be able to get away sooner than he had expected. These letters were not shared with Mervyn. He had never mentioned his step-father, nor made any enquiry about him. Whether it was from perversity, or sheer forgetfulness, Magdalen could not determine. She knew well Mervyn's power of putting from him subjects that were disagreeable or painful, and she feared sometimes that he had really succeeded in shutting out altogether the fact of Lord Wardlaw's existence. Had it not been that the boy had gone through so much lately, she would have questioned him about it; but he was at times, in spite of their re-union, so cast down and out of spirits that she did not like to force unwelcome topics upon him. He was sometimes filled with compunction for having left Nina just when she seemed to need him most; he never could speak of Totty without tears; and his anxiety over the telegrams and letters was intense. So she made up her mind to wait till they got back to Glen-Mervyn before she opened the subject.

As soon as the reports were really hopeful, she settled

a day for leaving London, for she was anxious to get Mervyn back among his old associations, and to see him recover his spirits.

They received a satisfactory account from Granton the day they started on their journey, and Mervyn's spirits rose accordingly. They rose still higher as he journeyed on, and got into the familiar country which indicated his entry into his beloved Wales. Every landmark seemed to bring him nearer and nearer to his old life, and the troubles of his recent one grew dimmer every instant. His mother marked with joy the light of his eye, and the animation of his whole countenance. She really had begun to fear that he had been cowed and saddened for good in his cousins' home.

They arrived very late, and he was too tired to do more than go straight to bed, reflecting on the happiness in store. He woke the next morning in a perfect transport of delight. The sight of the old Welsh hills from his bedroom window made him spring out of bed with a shout, at the thought that he was really back at Glen-Mervyn. Back at Glen-Mervyn! Back among the much-loved scenes and the familiar surroundings! Back, with his mother at his side, to be parted from her no more!

When he went down-stairs and found her sitting in her usual place at the breakfast table, he felt as if he had never been away, and as if the last three months had been part of a hideous dream which had disappeared like a ghost at cock-crow. How delightful it was to revisit all the familiar scenes with his mother; to take

her to the gate where they had parted, and to feel that all was over. How delightful, later in the day, to pay a visit with her to the Vicarage, and to feel so independent of Gwen and her tactless speeches; to have no concern with the prim little parlour and the stuffed birds; to wander home in the autumn sunset talking it all over, the words tumbling out unrestrainedly as of old, instead of having to write and spell them.

'Oh mother!' he exclaimed suddenly, 'I feel now just as if I had never been away from you or Glen-Mervyn!'

'Do you, darling?' she answered. 'Don't you feel the least bit different in yourself for all the changes you have been through?'

'Different?' he said quickly; 'Oh no! Not the least. Why should I?'

'Not even in your interests?' she questioned again.

'No, mother.'

Lady Wardlaw smiled, and slightly shook her head.

'I think I can prove the contrary,' she said. 'To-day, certainly, the old familiar surroundings have revived in you very strongly your old interests. But till now, since we met, what has been the chief topic of your conversation—your last thought at night, and your first in the morning?'

'Nina's illness,' she repeated; 'and Nina altogether, and poor little Totty, and your Aunt Lydia. In short, all the Granton affairs. Now, in the old days, used we to talk so much about them all?'

'No, he answered; 'I did not take the same interest in them.'

'Who did we chiefly talk of and take interest in?' she asked.

'Ourselves, I suppose,' he said rather unwillingly.

'There is one difference in you then, you see, already,' she went on. 'Your sympathies are enlarged, and the range of your existence is widened. We were very happy together here, no doubt, you and I, but perhaps there was a danger of our getting selfish; so our isolated happiness was brought to a close, and we were sent out into the world, to form new interests, and to have our sympathies for others drawn out. Do not for a moment, darling, suppose that I think you love me less because you love others more: I *know* you don't. But I *do* see a difference in you, for all the changes you have seen. And it is a difference I am glad and thankful to see. For I used to be a little frightened when you talked of "you and I," as if "you and I" were the only two people in the world, and as if there were no world at all outside Glen-Mervyn. But now it is different, and I cannot tell you how glad I am that it should be so.'

'But mother,' he objected, 'I don't know that it is so different as you think. Since I have been home, I feel quite to have forgotten Granton, and to take no interest in anyone or anything outside Glen-Mervyn; I assure you I don't.'

'Ah, Mervyn! I know you better than you know yourself. You think so, but I will prove to you that you are wrong. Now I will make your heart beat, and

your eyes sparkle by what I am going to say, and yet it does not concern me, or you, or Glen-Mervyn.'

Mervyn looked up, puzzled and unbelieving.

'Between the trees,' she said, quietly, 'I see the telegraph boy coming along, and . . . .

But Mervyn had shot from her side, like an arrow from a bow, and was tearing across the field to meet him, before she could finish her sentence.

She walked on, smiling to herself, and in a little while he came back breathless and eager, with the telegram in his hand. It proved very satisfactory. Nina was going on perfectly well. 'We shall get a letter to-morrow, with fuller accounts,' remarked Mervyn, as he walked by his mother's side, heart and mind full of Nina.

'So you feel no interest in anything outside Glen-Mervyn?' she said presently, finding he continued silent.

He looked up, smiling brightly. 'You are always right, mother,' he said. 'Is there a difference in you too, for the changes you have seen?' he asked after a few minutes. 'Have you got interests now outside Glen-Mervyn?'

He put the question rather anxiously, and looked up into her face.

'Mervyn,' she said—and it was evident she had not heard what he had said, for her eyes were looking away over the fields—'just go and see what the telegraph boy is coming to the house for. Does he want to be paid, or what?'

Mervyn went off, and came back running, with another telegram in his hand.

'There were two,' he said. 'The boy says I ran off so quickly, he had not time to tell me.'

He handed it to his mother, and watched her while she read it. Somehow, the autumn sunshine seemed to him less bright, and the decaying leaves less golden.

She gave him the paper when she had read it.

'I must answer this by telegram,' she said, 'so I am going in for a moment. I shall not be long.'

Her eyes were shining with that new expression that he had noticed once or twice since their re-union, and a happy smile played about her mouth. And that was all the answer he ever got to his question, as to whether she had interests outside Glen-Mervyn.

Very slowly he followed her towards the house, reading the telegram that told him Lord Wardlaw was coming. Magdalen, when she joined him on the terrace, saw how it was. She felt she had perhaps been unwise in avoiding the subject till now. But then, she had not expected her husband so soon.

They were standing, she and Mervyn, outside the bow-window, where she had broken the news to him. She felt emboldened by the memory of that conversation, and the complete conquest she had achieved.

'Mervyn,' she said, putting her hand on his shoulder, 'do you remember our conversation here that summer night?'

'Yes, mother.'

But the answer came in rather a bored tone of voice.

'Have you often thought it over since?'

'No, mother.'

Magdalen glanced at him quickly, and a shadow passed over her face.

'You don't mean to say you still put the subject from you, Mervyn, after all these months?'

Mervyn nodded.

'I was half afraid of this, from your letters. It is a fatal habit of yours, Mervyn. I am grievously disappointed.'

Mervyn hung his head, without answering.

'This cannot go on,' she said, very firmly. 'The sooner you turn your thoughts to the subject the better; for you see he is coming to-morrow.'

'Who?' said Mervyn, perversely.

She hesitated a minute, and then said, 'Your father.'

'My *father!*' echoed Mervyn, his face crimsoning.

'Your step-father, then,' she said; and there was something like impatience in her tone; 'or Charlie, or whatever you like to call . . . my husband.'

And Magdalen turned her head away, and pressed her hands together to control herself. She was surprised at the difficulty she felt in restraining her indignation. She wondered how far her patience and forbearance would endure, if Mervyn was going to put them to the test again. She realised that she was not so fit to bear with him now as she had been on a former occasion. She wondered why; and probed her heart and conscience to find an answer. Conscience had no answer to make, but her full heart gave it directly.

Ah! it was all very well to be patient, and to make allowances when it was a question of an abstract Lord Wardlaw, a man towards whom, in her then puzzled state of mind, she had had no definite feeling, beyond the wish to repair an act of injustice.

But now! . . . Now what was it? It was a question of the husband she loved with all her heart and soul; the man who in a few short months had flooded her life with sunshine, and brought back to her the grace and glory of her youth; who had radiated her present and her future with a light her past had never known; and had caused the trials and disappointments of the morning of her life to be lost in the full completeness of her noon-tide happiness! And Magdalen was troubled at the thought.

'Am I getting selfish?' she asked herself. 'Happiness ought not to make me less able to think of and feel for others. Can my new life be bad for me?'

But she knew it was not so. She knew that he who had restored to her the ideal and the illusions of her girlhood had done not only that, but infinitely more. He had also restored to her her faith in human nature, and her belief in human goodness, by bringing before her a living picture of what natural goodness can be, exalted by time and trial; and the contact with such a character had elevated her also, had implanted in her new aspirations, and stimulated her to fresh efforts.

Even dwelling in thought on the beauty of his character gave her strength now, and she felt it would teach her to forbear.

His patience with his step-son would, she knew, be inexhaustible; so hers must not fail. Besides, it was so foolish to have fears. Did she not *know* that he would win the boy over directly? Was it likely a loving nature like Mervyn's could resist him? Then why allow herself to be hurt and vexed by a mere prejudice on the boy's part? Why not wait on quietly, certain that all would be well?

So, turning to Mervyn with her usual gentle smile, she said: 'Call him what you like, darling. The time will come when you will be glad to call him father, and till then I will wait.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

MEETING OF LORD WARDLAW AND MERVYN LYNDSAY.

THE next morning's letter about Nina was as satisfactory as possible. The worst was over, and she had now only to get up her strength.

'I wish she could come here,' said Mervyn; 'she would be so happy with us, mother.'

'I hope she will come when she is well enough,' Lady Wardlaw answered; 'but I sometimes doubt if your Aunt Lydia will ever make up her mind to part from her.'

A short conversation on the subject ensued; and then Mervyn got ready to go as usual to his studies at the Vicarage. As he sped along through the autumn woods his thoughts were given to any and every subject but the impending arrival. It had completely escaped his memory. He received a warm welcome from the vicar, who did not conceal his pleasure at having him to teach again.

Studies over, Mervyn had a long talk with him on divers events that had occurred during his absence from Glen-Mervyn, and found so much to say that he stayed chatting till half-past five.

'Why, I quite forgot I was not living here,' he said, laughing; 'I must be running home to give mother her tea.'

As he went along he mused on the pleasure of having his mother to take care of again; of feeling that the house contained her; that she was there, safe and sound. He thought of that sad day when he visited the deserted terrace, and looked up at the empty house; and the overwhelming delight of hurrying home to her made him almost wish to revive the old feeling of desolation, that he might enjoy the present even more. So it came into his head, when he got to the stables, to go round, as he had done on the former occasion, and look at the house from the garden.

It was dusk when he got there; but from the drawing-room window came a blaze of warm light, which shone out into the darkness. The heart of the child beat high as he thought of his mother sitting in the firelight, waiting for him to return. Clinging to the branch of an old tree, which showered down golden leaves under the impetus he gave to it, he swung himself up, and peeped in at the window, his eager eyes searching for the beloved figure in its accustomed place. There was a long pause and a long silence. Every distant sound was audible in the stillness that prevailed; the barking of distant dogs, the lowing of distant cattle, and the distant voices of peasants as they wended their way home. But no nearer sound was audible.

An old white owl, who had been disturbed in her seat on the tree by the sudden bending of the branches,

peered down upon the little figure from an upper branch, as if wondering what that was that sat so very still. The silence was broken at last by a low sob, and the half-whispered words, 'She doesn't want me; I needn't have hurried home to give her her tea.'

There was a rustle among the branches, another shower of golden leaves from the tree, as the little watcher dropped from his seat, and stole away in the gathering darkness.

The white owl, startled again and somewhat rudely shaken from her perch, fluttered down upon the branch he had left, and became a spectator of what had scared the child away.

The fire was burning brightly, lighting up all the corners of the room. It played upon the tea equipage, revealing that the cups were empty, and the repast concluded. Magdalen was sitting in a low arm-chair, looking up to, and in deep conversation with, a tall fair man, who stood on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, looking down upon her as she sat.

The tell-tale firelight showed how intense was the interest of the conversation, how happy were the faces of the two as they talked. This was the scene which had sent Mervyn rushing to his own little bedroom, instead of going straight to his mother, as usual.

Half an hour afterwards Lady Wardlaw, getting uneasy at his absence, went in search of him, and finding his door locked, gently forced an entrance, and drew his story from him. By that time he had grown tired of his own society, and was ready to be consoled by her

soothing kisses, and her assurances that he was very much wanted indeed, and that both she and Lord Wardlaw had been expecting him every moment, and wondering what could have become of him.

'Now, darling,' she said gently, but very firmly, 'brush your hair and run down. You will find Charlie anxiously expecting you.'

'Ain't you coming, mother?' said Mervyn, rather blankly.

'No, dear,' she answered, quietly; 'I am going to dress. We dine earlier to-night. Why, Mervyn, you are not going to persuade yourself you are shy!'

Mervyn laughed a little at the idea of being shy; and Magdalen, anxious to keep him in a cheerful vein, talked on to him gaily all the time he was washing his hands and brushing his hair. She was suite sure he and Lord Wardlaw would get on better without her, and had made up her mind to leave them to themselves at first. She knew well the boy's sociable and genial disposition, and felt he would make friends directly.

'But you will come down soon, mother?' he said, as he kissed her and ran off.

As he passed through the hall, on his way to the drawing-room, his eye fell on a gun-case, lying there with other packages. Attracted by the sight he stopped short, and his eye sparkled.

'A breech-loader, I shouldn't wonder!' he exclaimed. He knelt down, undid the case, and examined the gun eagerly.

'I say, what a jolly one! I *wish* I had a breech-loader! I wonder if I could carry this.'

He took it out carefully, lifted it on to his shoulder, and tried to rise to his feet, gun and all. It was very heavy, and he nearly toppled over. In trying to recover his balance the gun fell from his shoulder, and came down with a crash on the marble floor.

The drawing-room door opened hastily, and Lord Wardlaw came out.

'Oh, I say, I'm so awfully sorry!' exclaimed Mervyn, running up to him, and holding out his hands; 'I *hope* it is not hurt.'

And he looked eagerly up into his step-father's face, with flushed cheeks and glowing eyes.

Lord Wardlaw took both the boy's hands in his, and returned the gaze with interest. His eyes never turned towards the gun; they were rivetted on the boy's face, and he made no answer.

The past came rushing before him as he gazed. The likeness of feature and colouring, the strange indescribable resemblance of voice and manner, the expression in the eyes, took him back years and years, and he seemed to be looking on the bright face of Magdalen Middleton as it had appeared the first time he had seen her.

It reminded him so forcibly of that first meeting, riding in the Park, when, a few minutes after their introduction, his horse had fallen on its knees, and, as it recovered itself, she had turned to him, saying, 'I *hope* it is not hurt!'

It was the very same face, the very same manner, the very same words. He felt himself carried straight back to that day, and, as in a dream he was about to answer as he had done then—when with sudden bitterness came the memory of another figure in that tableau—a figure riding on her other side. He seemed to see again the sardonic smile, and to hear the sarcastic remark on his horsemanship, and to feel the throb of furious anger mingled with the sense of triumph as he marked the indignation in Magdalen's face.

Then, when he thought how the child before him was that man's son; the man who had spoilt his youth, and embittered his early manhood; who had acted to him the part of a traitor under the guise of a benefactor, and been to him a very Judas:—he dropped the boy's hands, and turned away without a word.

So curious are the sudden changes and phases of feeling! He had not given his thoughts hitherto at all to this meeting, and now it overpowered him. Mervyn, on the other hand, who had dreaded and shrank from it, was completely absorbed in the gun, and perhaps only looked upon his step-father in the light of the breech-loader's owner. He was afraid, from Lord Wardlaw's manner, that he was angry, and, taking hold of his hand again, he said: 'I know I ought not to have touched it, but it was so tempting.'

Lord Wardlaw put his disengaged hand over his eyes, and tried to clear away the past and return to the present. The sublime and the ridiculous are ever ready to meet and mingle, and his sense of humour suddenly

showed him the construction that might be put upon his behaviour by the boy in this, the beginning of their acquaintance, namely, that he was a harsh and unforgiving step-father—an old ogre, in fact. It struck him as so ridiculous that he should play a part so foreign to his nature that he laughed, and with that laugh the mist of bygone years cleared away.

'Never mind the gun, my dear boy,' he said; 'I daresay there is no harm done.'

'Oh! but do let me see,' said Mervyn eagerly, and greatly relieved; 'it would be such a pity. A magnificent breach-loader like that. Please look!'

Smiling at his eagerness, Lord Wardlaw knelt down, and examined the gun carefully, Mervyn sitting on the top of the packing-case, looking on.

'Not injured a bit,' he said, after a pause; 'how did it happen?'

'I was trying to see if it was too heavy for me,' he answered frankly, 'and I lost my balance. I do so want a breech-loader,' he went on; 'are they ever made light enough for boys of my age?'

'To be sure,' said Lord Wardlaw, 'and you certainly ought to have one. Can you shoot a hare yet?'

Mervyn launched at once into an account of his performances, and Lord Wardlaw listened attentively at first; but the voice and manner made him dreamy again after a time, and he caught himself listening more to them than to what the boy was actually saying. Mervyn brought him up short by proposing to take the gun into the drawing-room, that he might look at it in the light, and try to understand it.

Lord Wardlaw assented, but not readily. He would have preferred remaining in the darkened hall, listening to the voice so full of association; and he was perhaps a little dreading the sight of the boy in the full glare of the lighted room, lest his eyes should detect in him some faint likeness to his father, and so destroy the favourable impression the child was making on him. Detecting in him every moment as he talked traces of Magdalen's sentiments, tastes, and opinions, he was beginning to feel the boy would become very dear to him, and he wanted to forget everything that might produce a contrary feeling. However, he rose, and did as Mervyn requested, carried the gun into the drawing-room, and laid it on the hearth-rug. Then he cast an anxious look at his step-son. But he was re-assured when his eye fell on the graceful figure and beaming face. There was no sort of likeness to anyone but Magdalen, and Lord Wardlaw drew a long breath of relief.

Standing on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire, he looked down admiringly upon Mervyn bending over the gun, and went on talking.

'Do you understand it now?' he asked, after a brief explanation.

'Quite,' answered Mervyn; 'and oh, how I wish I had one! I say! how tall you are,' he exclaimed, suddenly looking up, and measuring with his eye the figure before him. 'You must be taller than Uncle Rowley. What is your height?'

'Six foot two,' answered Lord Wardlaw, smiling.

'Oh, he is only six foot, so you are two inches taller than him. I hope I shall be as tall as you. Mother is five foot seven,' he added, proudly.

Lord Wardlaw was dreaming again, and answered absently, 'Five foot seven! That is not much of a height.'

'Not much of a height,' exclaimed Mervyn, indignantly; 'why it is a perfect height for a lady.'

'A lady? Oh, yes. I beg your pardon. I thought you were speaking of a man. I agree with you that five foot seven is a charming height. What lady were you speaking of?'

'Mother,' answered Mervyn, his voice and manner softening.

'Whose mother?' asked Lord Wardlaw, absently.

'*Mine*,' answered Mervyn, in his firm tone of proud appropriation.

Lord Wardlaw still looked a little at sea, but suddenly recollecting himself, he said: 'A perfect height; yes, I did not understand you were speaking of Magdalen.'

Lord Wardlaw's voice softened too, as he pronounced his wife's name, and Mervyn looked up sharply. For there was in the tone the same ring of proud appropriation that had just sounded in his own. It might have been its echo.

And at that moment she entered, dressed for dinner. Lord Wardlaw advanced and put a chair for her, unconsciously coming up against Mervyn, who was in the act of doing the same thing. All three laughed; but

Mervyn's smile died away soonest, and he brushed passed Lord Wardlaw, and went and stood by his mother rather defiantly. His attitude expressed what the tone of his voice had declared before—that he considered her his exclusive possession; and wished to make patent his right of monopoly.

'You must go up and dress, darling,' she said gently. 'Dinner will be early to-night.'

Mervyn went off directly, and Lord Wardlaw prepared to follow.

'Well, Charlie?' said his wife, questioningly, and rather anxiously.

'We made friends over a breech-loader,' he answered, smiling, as he passed her. Left alone in the drawing-room, by the flickering fire, Magdalen sank into a fit of meditation. She wondered a little what had brought that peculiar look into her husband's eye, and why her entrance should so have changed the expression of Mervyn's face. He looked happy and friendly when she had first caught sight of him as she opened the door. She suspected the truth very soon. She saw that it had been hard for her husband to meet Mr. Lyndsay's son, and she feared it had revived some old feelings of bitterness. She saw that Mervyn would love and enjoy his step-father except in so far as she was concerned; be perfect friends apart from her, but feel differently in her presence. That little contretemps about the chair gave her an idea of how matters would be. Mervyn, accustomed to care for her and monopolise her entirely, would resent Lord Wardlaw's interference

and she sighed as she wondered how it would all go on. From that she fell to thinking what a curious position theirs was. How curious it all was! What a curious thing life was! What an odd history hers had been. How strange it was that Charlie Digby should be, by a curious chain of circumstances, master, as it were, in Mr. Lyndsay's home. On what a different scene had the walls of this room once looked down. As she thought of that dreary time, so long ago, she wondered how she ever could have borne it. What a life for a girl to lead! It was dangerous to turn her thoughts that way; and to think that while she was living out day by day that dreary monotonous routine, incarcerated in a living tomb, Charlie had been living out his in exile, fretting and chafing against her, against fate, against Providence even; thinking her worldly, mercenary, faithless; and that all the while they might have been living happily together. She knew he was thinking the same to-night; she had seen it in his eyes. And as she thought it over, she could not help wondering *why* it had all been allowed. It was not as if he had been situated like most men who, when disappointed like him, can divert their thoughts by change and amusement, and seek a new object of affection. For his life in the out-of-the-way foreign courts to which it had throughout been his fate to be appointed, had offered no distraction to him. No English face had crossed his path, to put hers out of his head. So there had been nothing to prevent the full force of early disappointment falling upon him, and being a sore trial.

Why should he have been tried like this? What had he done that he should have had his youth marred and spoilt in this way?

She was puzzled, till she began to meditate on a subject of which she never tired—the beauty of her husband's character; and then she began to understand a little. For she could not but tell herself that it was that early trial that had helped to make it what it now was. Though it was the same character which had at first attracted her to him, she could not but own that it was ennobled and matured under the influence of time and trial. It might have been that, in a spirit so light and happy, something of depth and earnestness had been wanting, and God, by giving him the trial had developed the want and supplied it. And the result was a character at once rare and beautiful. For he was not, as many would have been under the like circumstances, a soured embittered man. Far from it. He had borne his life bravely, and retained through it all a natural sweetness of temper and power of enjoyment; the freshness, in short, and the charm of youth; the almost boylike zest and keenness in both his amusements and his occupations.

Still his character bore ineffaceable marks of his early disappointment, giving the man strength, and depth, and reality.

'So it has been for the best, after all,' she said, half out loud; and as she spoke he came into the room.

'Charlie,' she said softly.

He came up smiling, but she detected through the

smile the same expression she had noticed before. He stationed himself on the hearth-rug, and looked all round the room, taking in its minutest details; and then his eye met hers. She saw she was right in supposing that his thoughts had followed the same train as her own; and a few questions drew the truth from him.

'Life is difficult to understand, Charlie, isn't it?' she said, rather wistfully.

'Difficult,' he answered, 'but not impossible.'

The wistful look left her face at the firm answer, and was succeeded by one of loving admiration. Mervyn's entrance prevented further conversation, and soon after the gong sounded.

Dinner passed off pleasantly. Lord Wardlaw gave an account of some of his Fenian adventures, and Mervyn was a delighted and interested listener. The conversation branched off to shooting, cricket, and other subjects of a like nature. Charlie and Mervyn talked eagerly, and Magdalen listened, which she was well content to do.

Leaning back in her chair, and watching the two she loved so dearly rapidly progressing in intimacy, her doubts and fears vanished, and Hope told her that all would be well.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE NEW MÉNAGE.

HOPE, however, told a flattering tale. That first evening was a very fair type of what followed.

Attracted, in spite of himself, to Lord Wardlaw, Mervyn soon grew very fond of him, in so far as he himself was concerned, and took great delight in his society. He found him a most charming companion, as keen and eager as he was himself, and just as capable of enjoyment.

Mervyn had never had so much shooting, or so many holidays in his life, as he got in the first three weeks after his step-father's arrival. Lord Wardlaw had given him a breech-loader, and was always planning out days of fun for him in which to use it. He was kindness itself to the boy, and no doubt Mervyn's life was really the happier for the change.

Formerly there had certainly—though he had never found it out—been a want in his life of a companion with kindred tastes and pursuits. His mother's interest and sympathy in all his pleasures, keen as they had always been, were necessarily, as he grew older, a little forced—a little those of a looker-on. She could enjoy

them for his sake, but she could not always join in them. But here was one ever ready to share in them, and with the same zest and unflagging zeal as himself.

Lord Wardlaw, on his side, soon got over the feelings his first introduction to his step-son had temporarily awakened, and daily found in him some new quality to love and admire.

So far all went well. But the moment Lord Wardlaw in any way came between the boy and his mother, the moment he interfered in the slightest degree with what Mervyn considered his exclusive rights, that moment all was changed.

It might be only that he handed her her tea; that he mounted her on her horse; that he brought her a flower from the conservatory for her hair: it was enough to set the boy's blood boiling with indignation, and to make him at once assume an attitude of defiant appropriation. He had always had a monopoly of her, and he could not understand another interfering with it. He would instantly assert his rights, and show that he considered he had the first claim upon her.

Lord Wardlaw was very kind about it, but he could not always give way; neither did Magdalen desire it. In fact, she rather discouraged her husband's humouring Mervyn, as he was inclined to do at first, for she thought it was bad for the boy.

Mervyn soon became aware that any such displays on his part, accompanied as they generally were by flushing cheeks and other demonstrations of anger, were not pleasing to his mother; but this, instead of affecting

him in a right way, only made him all the more angry with Lord Wardlaw. He would have hated any one who caused that look of sorrowful displeasure to come into her eyes.

One day they were all three walking in the direction of the gate where Mervyn and his mother had parted. Mervyn, who was a little way on in front, bounded over it. Lord Wardlaw followed his example, and then turned to assist his wife.

Magdalen, in getting over it, got her foot entangled in her gown; and if Lord Wardlaw had not been close at hand, she must have fallen.

Mervyn, looking hastily around, took in the position of affairs, and was provoked with himself for not having been as attentive as his step-father.

'It is an awkward gate for a lady,' said Lord Wardlaw. 'I think a step might be put on each side of the third bar, to make it easier to climb. Don't you, Magdalen?'

'I think it would be a very good plan,' she answered, 'and very easily done.'

'It had better be done at once, then,' said her husband, 'as we so often come this way. I will speak about it.'

A sudden insane feeling of dislike to Lord Wardlaw's interference came over Mervyn.

'It's always been like that,' he said, quickly; 'it does very well.'

Lord and Lady Wardlaw both looked round in surprise.

'My dear boy,' said the former, 'it doesn't do at all well if your mother falls over it.'

'She never fell over it before,' said Mervyn, hardly knowing what he was saying. 'It must have been your . . .'

'Your fault,' he was going to say; but a look in his mother's eyes, of astonishment mixed with displeasure, stopped him.

She walked on, talking quietly to her husband, and Mervyn was left behind, not knowing whether to follow them or not. Hot tears blinded his eyes as he got over the gate again, and went back into the wood.

'How dare he!' he muttered, as he slowly retraced his steps homewards; 'how dare he interfere! He shan't put a step on the gate! I won't have it done! The gate's not his. It's mother's and mine! Why should he interfere? He shan't! If he dares to have a step put on, I'll take it off again!'

His chest heaved as he thought of the glance he had received from his mother. 'How dare he!' he muttered again, passionately, clenching his hands; 'how dare he make her angry with me! She was never angry with me till he came.'

He did not go home till he had recovered himself a little. No notice was taken. His step-father treated him exactly as if nothing had happened; only in his mother's eyes he thought he saw the same grave shadow, and it made him miserable.

A fresh turn, however, was given to his thoughts by his mother's announcement that Mrs. Middleton had

written to say Nina would come to Glen-Mervyn in a few days.

For the next day or two he was full of plans for her comfort and enjoyment. His mother saw the change with pleasure, and greatly hoped that Nina's presence would divert the boy's thoughts from herself, by giving him a fresh object of love and care.

On the morning of her expected arrival, Mervyn, before starting for the Vicarage, went out to superintend a little garden he was having arranged for his cousin, close to his own. She was to divide her journey in two, so she would be at Glen-Mervyn about the middle of the day. He had got leave from his mother to come away from the Vicarage two hours earlier than usual, so that he might be at home to meet her.

The arrangements in the little garden completed, he returned to the house to wish his mother 'Good-bye' before starting. It occurred to him, on the way, to get a bunch of violets for her; and hastening into the breakfast-room, he ran up to her and presented them. She was in the act of receiving them with a smile, when Lord Wardlaw came in, with the very ditto of Mervyn's gift in his hand; and advancing, without perceiving what was going on, he held them out to his wife. Magdalen looked from one to the other, puzzled and smiling. Mervyn flushed crimson, and was in the act of pushing back his step-father's gift, when his mother stopped him with a look he well understood.

'Oh, never mind,' said Lord Wardlaw, kindly; 'I did

not see Mervyn had brought you some. I'll put mine in the drawing-room.' And he walked off, whistling.

Mervyn stood in front of his mother, with downcast eyes, his violets in his hand. She did not offer to take them. He heard her sigh, and raising his head, he burst out passionately—

'Why does he always interfere? It's not my fault!'

Lady Wardlaw made no answer, but moved away to the window, and stood there looking out.

'Mother,' pleaded Mervyn, following her, and holding out his violets, 'please take them.'

'No, dear,' she answered gently, but very firmly; 'I cannot take them now.'

'Why not?' burst out Mervyn.

'They would give me no pleasure,' she answered; 'they would only remind me that my boy's gift was only . . . what I fear his affection for me is fast becoming.'

'What?' asked Mervyn hotly, anxious and yet fearful to hear the end of the sentence.

'Selfish,' she answered sadly; utterly and entirely selfish.'

'I can't help it,' cried Mervyn; 'it is all his fault. I was never like this before.'

'You were never tried,' she answered quietly. 'Life is easy enough while there are no trials or temptations. The battle is no battle where there are no foes to contend with. True soldiery in life's warfare consists in living in the thick of the fight, and contending with the enemies that surround you.'

'Then you do call him my enemy?' said Mervyn, hardly knowing what he was saying.

'You know very well that I did not mean that,' said his mother. And in all his life he had never seen her look so stern.

It maddened him. That his mother should speak and look so, made him beside himself. He could not trust himself to stay. His anger against his step-father, who was the cause of these unwonted discussions between him and his mother, rose too high in his heart, and he rushed out of the room. In this mood he started for the Vicarage, the incident having driven all thoughts of Nina out of his head. Injured and moody, smarting under his imaginary wrongs, he walked along slowly and listlessly, as unlike his eager bounding self as possible.

The vicar noticed he was absent and inattentive, but he asked no questions. He had seen Mervyn thus once or twice lately, and guessed a little at the reason. He set him free at the hour his mother had named, and walked a little way with him; but he found him so silent and gloomy, that he thought it best to leave him, and turned off half-way to visit some of his poor people.

Left to himself, Mervyn walked slowly on. He was thoroughly wretched and uncomfortable, angry with himself, and displeased with everybody else. He dawdled along, anxious to delay, as long as possible, his return home. He reached the gate, and was getting absently over it, when his foot struck against some unwonted obstruction.

'What in the world is it?' he said to himself. And he stooped down to see.

The ledge!—the step Lord Wardlaw had spoken of!—the step he, in his wrath, had declared should never be put on. His smouldering anger burst out.

'How dare he!' he exclaimed. 'How dare he touch our gates and interfere with our concerns! I won't have it! Let him go and put steps on his own Fenian gates, and leave ours alone. I said I would take it off if he dared to put it on. And so I will!'

With all the strength of passion, the boy kicked at the ledge with the heels of his boots, first on one side, and then on the other. When he had loosened it a little, he took out his pocket-knife, and with an energy and a perseverance worthy of a better cause, dug out the nails one by one. Then, standing on the bar of the gate, he stamped upon the ledge with all his force, and drove it from its place. It was easy after that to pull it off, and to throw it away; and then he drew a long breath, and turned homewards.

Meanwhile Nina had arrived, and was sitting by the fire in the drawing-room, patiently awaiting his return. Outwardly patient at least; but it would have been difficult for anyone to guess, from her calm exterior, how tumultuously her heart was beating at the thoughts of seeing Mervyn again.

A hundred recollections were rushing over her as she sat there with her hands folded, gazing into the fire. Thoughts of their life together, of the help he had been to her, of the good he had unconsciously done her.

Absence, memory, and illness, had intensified her feeling for him, and she had grown to look upon him as a sort of angel-messenger of peace and goodness, who had played the part of a guiding-star in her life; leading her on, by the light of a bright example, to higher and holier things. He reminded her of so much; he was so interwoven with every scene of the sacred past. He would be for ever so closely associated in her mind with her little dead brother, and with the memories she held so sadly dear. When she had, shrinking, heard Totty's death-warrant sounded in her ears, it was Mervyn who had soothed and supported her. In that terrible struggle on the night of the storm, it was the thought of him, and the sound of his voice, that had calmed her and brought her to a better state of feeling. When she woke the morning after her little brother's death, she had found Mervyn watching over her, striving in his unselfishness to hide his own great joy in his pity for her sorrow. It was he who had been instrumental in softening her heart towards her mother; and his hand it was that had led her to her mother, and put an end to their estrangement.

So sat and pondered, the pale-faced child by the fire, her heart swelling with love and admiration; while the object of her meditation, with eyes inflamed with passion, was hacking away at the gate!

Lady Wardlaw's motherly heart had ached when the girl had first arrived, to see what a change her illness had made. Nina was so pale and thin, so quiet and subdued. She had felt it quite difficult to identify her

with the child who, with glittering eyes and crimson cheeks had addressed her so passionately. She took her up-stairs at first, to take off her things, and tried to persuade her to lie down and rest; but Nina, with an animation which she had not yet shown, entreated so earnestly to be allowed to come to the drawing-room, so as to catch the first glimpse of Mervyn on his return, that Magdalen brought her down again, and established her by the fire. She tried, as they waited, to engage her in conversation; but Nina's eyes wandered every moment to the door, and she seemed to be listening to every sound.

The door opened rather suddenly after a time, and the girl started and got crimson. But it was only Lord Wardlaw.

'Mervyn is late,' he said; 'he ought to be here by this time. I suppose you are too tired to come and meet him, Nina? It is a most lovely afternoon.'

Nina looked so unfeignedly delighted at the idea, that Magdalen had not the heart to demur, and sent for her things. Lord Wardlaw wrapped her up carefully, and promised, laughing, to carry her if she was tired.

'This fine mountain air will soon put a colour into your little pale face,' he said kindly, as he opened the hall-door. They stepped out into the autumn sunset; and Nina's eyes rested with a feeling she could not define on the grand old mountains, and the richly wooded country, lying under the warm glow of the setting sun.

They strolled on among the golden lights, and the

red-brown leaves; Lord Wardlaw talking pleasantly, without obliging her to answer. She was thinking how happy and how peaceful it all seemed; what a wild and beautiful home Mervyn's was; and how happy he must be. When they got to a certain point, from which the path through the woods to the gate could be seen for a very long way, Lord Wardlaw spread a plaid on a heap of dead leaves, and made Nina sit down.

'That is the way he will come,' he said, as he seated himself by her side; 'so we shall see him for a long time before he gets up to us.'

They did not have to wait very long. At the end of the long vista a figure presently appeared in the shadow, and emerged gradually into the light. Nina's face flushed all over as Mervyn came in sight, and her beautiful eyes glowed and deepened. They filled with tears too, even while a smile of infinite pleasure illumined her face. The yearning look which she fixed upon him as he came along surprised and touched Lord Wardlaw. He had had no idea the children were so fond of one another.

'He doesn't hurry himself,' he observed; 'I never knew Mervyn walk so slow. The fact is he doesn't see us yet. He won't catch sight of you at first, as I think I hide you a little by sitting on this side. Why, how languidly the boy is coming! He generally bounds along.'

Nina's heart beat quickly as she watched the graceful figure approach; while, with something of her old

characteristics, she felt half inclined to run away and hide herself.

Mervyn, when he did at last catch sight of his step-father, stopped short, and blushed scarlet. He did not see who was sitting on the other side, and took it for granted it must be his mother. He was seized with a feeling of guilty shame, at the thought of what he had just done. He had hardly realised, till that moment, how wrongly he had been acting; but now conscience told him how much he would dread his mother going on to the gate, and viewing the havoc he had made.

Suddenly, he recognised Nina; and the little figure in its deep mourning, the pale face bearing upon it the traces of sickness and sorrow, sent all other thoughts straight out of his head, and transported him back to past scenes. He is at Granton again, in the chilling atmosphere of that cold loveless home. Contrasting sharply with the warmth and the love by which he is surrounded, comes the recollection of the loneliness, the isolation, the terrible depression; of evenings of sadness in the sombre school-room, before he had found in Nina a friend and a comforter; of the terrible longing for his mother, and for the love and the sympathy that had always been his.

The sight of the calm little face which had been such a refuge to him in all that sad time, brought a burst of love and gratitude to his heart; brought thoughts of the companionship, and the ever-ready sympathy, which had helped to reconcile him to his separation from his mother; followed quickly by feelings of pity and ten

derness at the memory of the closing scenes of his visit, her terrible trial, and her illness; and his own compunction at having had to leave her in sickness and in sorrow, just as she seemed to need him most.

He stopped short for a minute as all this rushed over him; and then, in his old impetuous way, he dashed forward, calling out as he ran, 'Nina! Nina!'

Nina started from her seat, and went eagerly to meet him, all her shyness having fled at the first sound of his voice.

Lord Wardlaw felt a little nervous as he saw the impetuous advance, fearing his step-son had forgotten how weak and delicate Nina was. He held himself in readiness to protect her, in case she should be knocked over; little knowing that the noisy greeting and boisterous embraces were the best medicines the poor child could have. But when, the meeting over, the children, with arms entwined, and happy faces, came walking towards him, their heads close together, in deep and eager conversation, he realised that there was no occasion for his presence, and no need for his help; and smiling, left them together, and went home to tell the story to his wife.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SHOT IN THE WOODS.

Lady Wardlaw noticed a change in Mervyn that evening, and a change which she was glad to see. He was rather quiet and thoughtful; he did not force his attentions on his mother, and he was particularly nice and affectionate to Lord Wardlaw. She thought some part of the change arose from having his little cousin to care for and attend to.

But it was not only that. Nina had brought with her such an atmosphere of Granton, that Mervyn's own home by contrast seemed to him an earthly Paradise; and he found himself constantly comparing Lord Wardlaw with Colonel Middleton, and wondering that he had never considered before what a much kinder and nicer father one was than the other.

Nina did not talk much. Her eyes, Lady Wardlaw noticed, were seldom off Mervyn, and they followed his every movement with an evident love and delight. Magdalen fancied a day spent alone with her cousin would be a satisfaction to the girl, and make her feel more at home. So she proposed to Lord Wardlaw that they should ride the next day to a neighbour's house at

a great distance, and have luncheon, leaving Mervyn in charge of Nina at home. A holiday was to be given him for the purpose; and the arrangement gave satisfaction to all parties. So all the next day the two children were alone, as in the old days.

Bit by bit, Nina told Mervyn of all the changes at home; of the happy state of things between her and her mother; and of how different it all was now. She was getting quite fond of the baby, she said, and Edmund had become such a nice little boy. Cecily, too, had grown so much more sensible, and used to sit in her room quite quiet, and get her anything she wanted.

Mademoiselle, who had come back, was so nice now that she didn't mind the least asking her about her headaches, and really wanted to hear the answer.

'When I was getting well, Mervyn,' she said, softly, 'and had so much time to lie still and think, I used to go over all the things you and I used to talk about. I made up my mind then that I would do what you asked me, and try to do what I used to call my impossible things. You remember what they were. Do you know I found it all so much easier than I expected, that I begin to think it was all my fancy before, or else my fault. And Mervyn,' she added, in a whisper, 'I don't think you will have to say again that you think I shall never understand about the love of God, because I don't love my mother, and that so you don't see how I am ever to learn. All that is quite different now. I am beginning to understand it in the same way that you said you did. She had a headache one day, from sitting

up with me at night, and I did your cure, and I am always going to take care of her now when she is ill. And, Mervyn, do you remember telling me I loved so very few? Well, I don't think that is the case now. Every day I love them all more, and that makes everything so different. You first made me think how pleasant it would be to love everybody, and how much easier it would make everything. And it *does* make me so much happier. If I were to hear that sermon again about happy homes, and the love of parents, and children, brothers and sisters, I should understand it much better now. I feel it is all owing to you, Mervyn. For if you had never come to Granton, I should never have known what being loving and kind meant. You were always nice and affectionate and attentive to everyone, and made everyone love you wherever you went. I am always wishing to be like you, and am going to try more and more.'

'Oh stop, stop! Nina,' exclaimed the conscience-stricken Mervyn, jumping up, and blushing scarlet, 'you don't know what I am, you don't really. I don't deserve to be praised, indeed I don't.'

Nina looked at him in surprise. Then she remembered that on a former occasion, when she had praised him, he had blushed in the same way, and that a certain reserve had crept over him, for which she had not been able to account. She had wondered then what the flaw could be in a character which she considered perfect. She wondered now. He was evidently fully aware of it himself; so, after a minute's pause, she said, gently:

'You wouldn't tell me about it once before, Mervyn; but you'll tell me now?'

And he told her: confessed all his evil feelings and his ill behaviour, suppressing only what he had done to the gate the day before, for not even to Nina could he tell anything his mother did not know.

'You are dreadfully shocked, Nina,' he said, anxiously, when he had finished, observing the expression of her face.

Nina could not deny it; but the fact was, she was more disappointed and puzzled than shocked. She had exalted Mervyn's character into an idol, and now it had crumbled away. Love, as demonstrated in him, had always seemed to her such a pure feeling, as well as such a governing impulse, that she was puzzled to find that that love was now the very cause of his erring, the actual obstacle and stumbling-block in his path. And she was tempted in that moment to believe, as many others have believed before her, to their infinite pain and trouble, that it *was* wrong after all to love so intensely, and to expend so much affection on human beings; that it was, in fact, to worship the creature more than the Creator; that such love degenerated into idolatry, and brought a host of evils in its train. The child would have been comforted by the words of a writer of the present century: 'No one ever loved child, parent, or sister too much. It is not the intensity of affection, but its interference with truth or duty, that makes it idolatry. Love was given, sanctioned, and encouraged . . . . that *self might be annulled.*' Something of their sense and

meaning came to her as she thought. She tried in her own mind to excuse him she loved by accusing herself, and turning back her thoughts to her little dead brother; sought whether, in her love for him, such flaw had not existed. But it was no use. Her innate truthfulness asserted itself over her wish to screen Mervyn; and she could not but own to herself that she would have cared little *who* rendered the little boy tender and loving offices, provided he *were* tended and loved. Nay more, she would have loved anyone who loved him, and been grateful to anyone who had showed for him thought or consideration. Had not her life been made bitter by the very want of love displayed toward the child? Was not her new-born love for her mother owing in a great measure to the love she had shown for his memory? Did not her affection for Mervyn chiefly date from the day she had found him playing in the nursery with Totty? She knew that if she were Mervyn she should love Lord Wardlaw ten times more for making his mother so happy; and she was obliged to own to herself that the fault lay not in the love, but in Mervyn himself. The flaw in his affection for his mother was a slight tinge of selfishness; and selfishness is in itself a contradiction to love.

Curiously enough, Mervyn's own thoughts had been following in something of the same train. His mind had travelled back to his mother's words of yesterday, when she had refused to take his violets.

'They would give me no pleasure; for they would

only remind me that my boy's gift was what I fear his affection for me is fast becoming.'

And the scales fell from his eyes.

'I'll never be like that again,' he said, impetuously. 'I see it all now. I see that if I loved mother as unselfishly as you loved Totty, I should not mind who did all the things for her as long as they were done. Now should I?'

'Perhaps not,' said Nina, softly.

. . . . . .

Mervyn's demeanour to his step-father that evening was very marked. Twice he checked himself when about to do some little service for his mother, because he saw Lord Wardlaw on the point of doing it. He went to bed happy, and full of new resolutions. But he quite forgot to make his confession about the gate!

'What a number of shooting accidents there have been lately,' said Magdalen, the next morning at breakfast, putting down the paper. 'This is the third I have seen in a fortnight. Charlie and Mervyn, please be careful.'

'I wish I had a chance,' laughed Mervyn. 'There is no fear of my shooting myself till Saturday, mother dear, I am sorry to say.'

'Which way are you going to-day, Charlie?' asked Magdalen.

Lord Wardlaw described his route, and added to Mervyn, 'We may as well go together, Mervyn, as far as we can. Our roads lie the same way for a bit.'

The keeper and the dogs were waiting, and it was time to start; so Mervyn went to get his books together, and Magdalen and Nina went into the drawing-room.

'What shall be our plan for the day, Nina?'

'I must write mamma a long letter, Aunt Magdalen. She sends you so many messages in hers, that I think you had better read it.'

Magdalen took it, and as she read rejoiced at the anxious motherly tenderness and love it breathed.

'Good-bye, Magdalen,' said Lord Wardlaw, suddenly appearing at the window.

'Good-bye, Charlie,' she said, going towards him; 'bear in mind my warning about shooting accidents.'

'No fear with only one gun,' he answered, smiling, as he leant against the window and lighted his cigar; 'I shan't be late to-day. It gets too dark to do any good after half-past four. Good-bye, Nina. Where's Mervyn?'

Mervyn soon appeared, and the party started, Magdalen and Nina watching them from the window. A pretty sight, altogether. The tall athletic man, with his gun on his shoulder, the graceful boy bounding along by his side; the keeper and the dogs behind. At any rate the wife and mother thought so, looking at them with loving eyes.

Just as they disappeared she saw Mervyn look up at his step-father, and Lord Wardlaw throw his arm round the boy's shoulder, and she turned with a sigh of pleasure from the window.

The morning passed pleasantly and quickly, and after luncheon Magdalen and Nina started for a drive. There was a good deal to do in the town, and they were detained there longer than Lady Wardlaw had expected, so that it was nearly dark when they reached home. She whipped up the ponies as they neared Glen-Mervyn, saying she almost thought her husband would have arrived first. But on enquiring of the butler she found he had not returned. The lamps were lighted in the drawing-room, and the tea was ready. They went up to take off their things. When Nina came down again she found Magdalen already there, pouring out the tea.

'Charlie and Mervyn are both late,' she said, 'but I daresay they will be here directly.'

Nina drank her tea slowly, and found herself wishing they would come in. Her illness had left her nervous, and she had not so much self-control as she used to have. Anything sudden was apt to startle her; the unexpected ringing of a bell, or opening of a door, especially. Several times since she had been at Glen-Mervyn her heart had leaped into her mouth at sudden sounds, and she had wondered to see her aunt unmoved and unconcerned.

She found herself now listening anxiously, and wondering why her uncle and cousin did not appear. It rendered her unable to talk; and Magdalen, thinking she was tired, took up a book, and began to read, Nina leaned back in her chair, and watched her. How calm she looked! How quietly she was reading her book, and how interested she seemed in it. Nina sighed, and

wished she could be as calm, and not worry herself with imaginary fears. It gave her strength, however; for she felt that it was but nervousness on her part, and that there was nothing really to be alarmed about.

'I will not let myself get fussy,' she said, 'till half-past five.'

Twenty minutes past five, five-and-twenty minutes past five; still no sound of any arrival. Nina's heart began to beat again, but a glance at the calm face opposite quieted her. Still she could not help wishing the room were not quite so light and bright. It made everything feel so like night, and she did not like to think it was so late. What *could* they be doing? Why should *both* be so late? It was impossible Lord Wardlaw could have shot for the last hour. Why did he promise to be home before dusk? And oh, why had there been any talk about shooting accidents? It was that which made her so nervous. Her aunt's gentle voice, breaking in upon her thoughts, quite made her start.

'Nina,' she said, putting down her book, 'what time did Charlie say he would be home?'

In vain did Nina try to steady her voice to answer. The flutter in her heart betrayed itself in her voice; and Lady Wardlaw, alarmed, got up and went to her.

'My dear child, what is the matter? Are you ill?'

Nina hid her face in the sofa cushion, and tried to escape from her aunt's eye. She did not want to say what was the matter. The last thing she wished was to infect Magdalen with her fears. She hated herself

for her weakness and want of self-control. She tried to say she was only a little tired. Magdalen knelt down by her side and put her arms round her.

'Tell me what it is, dear, and then perhaps I can explain it away.'

'Oh, it's nothing, nothing, Aunt Magdalen,' she said, still trying to hide her face; 'it is only I am so silly. Since that dreadful night, everything frightens me, and . . . . and . . . .'

Just then the clock struck half-past five, and Nina started.

'Are you frightened because they don't come home?' said Magdalen, tenderly. 'You need not be dear, really. Mervyn is apt to be unpunctual, and Charlie is often much later than this.'

'But he said . . . .' began Nina.

'He certainly said he would leave off shooting early; but he was shooting at a great distance to-day, and would have a long walk after he had left off. He would be sure to shoot till the last moment, don't you see? I don't think he could be home till now, I assure you, dear. He must have been a long way off all day, for we have not heard a single shot. Generally there is popping round the house all the time he is out.'

Comforted a little, Nina lay back in her chair again.

'I wonder if it is very dark,' she said.

'Would you like to come to the window and see? The air will refresh you, and drive away these nervous fancies.'

So saying, Magdalen walked across the room, drew back the curtain, and opened the window.

Nina followed; and, leaning against it, peered out into the darkness. The air refreshed her, and she began to feel a little braver.

'Listen if there is any sign of them to be heard,' said Magdalen, and she bent her head. Nina did the same.

For some minutes no sound reached their ears. The fresh air played on their faces, and rustled faintly among the dying leaves on the trees close at hand; but otherwise all was quiet.

Magdalen was just about to draw in her head, when there rang out in the silence the loud report of a gun! . . . .

It came so suddenly that they both started, and Nina exclaimed, 'Oh, Aunt Magdalen! Aunt Magdalen! what can that be?'

'It's all right, dear,' Magdalen answered; but her voice sounded rather strange. 'It is Charlie letting off his gun before he comes into the house. He will soon be here now.'

'But that other sound,' Nina whispered to herself, so faintly that the words were inaudible.

'What?' said Magdalen, sharply.

'Oh nothing, nothing,' said Nina, shivering. 'Let us shut the window, Aunt Magdalen. It is so cold.'

So they returned into the warm room, and the lamplight fell upon their faces, revealing Nina's paler than ever, and a look on Magdalen's which had not been there before.

She sat down again with her book, but she was not reading it now; and Nina crouched by the fire, pretending to warm herself, but in reality to keep her back to Magdalen and avoid meeting her eye.

What is it that has brought that new expression on Magdalen's calm face? What is the unexpressed dread that has risen in her breast? What was the sound she heard AFTER the shot, to which she is trying to attach no importance; which she is vainly persuading herself must have been fancy?

It was a boy's voice, shouting, as if in mortal terror or pain, and a terrible fear has entered the mother's heart.

For she *knows* it was Mervyn's voice.

What if Mervyn, running home in the darkness, had not seen Lord Wardlaw's figure, and had come in the way, unperceived, just as the gun was being let off? . . .

It was, it *must* have been fancy. Nina evidently had not heard it, or she would have . . . Her eye wandered on to the girl's figure, crouching by the fire.

Could it be possible that . . . oh no! no! impossible.

But why, then, did she sit huddled up like that, with her back turned? Why did she not speak? What could be the matter with the girl? She was cold, probably, after standing at the window—cold, of course. It was a cold night, and Nina was chilly after her illness. But she ought to be warm by this time, in front of that roaring fire. . . .

What a curious thing attitude was! It expressed so much sometimes! What did that huddled up, crouching attitude express?

What if Nina *had* heard it too? Should she ask her?

But the mother's heart failed her. She *could* not ask, lest she should hear from the child's lips a confirmation of her own terrible suspicions. If both had heard it, it could not be fancy.

She would wait five minutes more, and *then* . . . if they had not arrived, she would question the girl.

In the meanwhile she tried to persuade herself it had not been Mervyn's voice. It was some boy passing, either shouting to another, or startled by the sound of the gun.

In vain! The mother *could* not convince herself she was mistaken; knew in her heart that it *was* her boy's voice; the voice she loved so dearly, the voice that had been the music of her life for so many, many years!

The five minutes passed, and still she had not spoken. But suddenly she feared she was selfish.

If Nina were really suffering from the same fear, how cruel to let her bear it alone! Shattered in nerves already, what agonies of mind she might be enduring!

This must not be, she must do violence to her own feelings, in order to assist another.

Pressing her hands upon her breast, and summoning up all her courage, she roused herself to speak.

'Nina,' she said softly, 'come here.' She was a brave

woman; but she trembled when she saw the effect of her words; for the girl started first and shuddered, then rose slowly, still keeping her face turned away, and advanced to Magdalen's side.

It told its own tale, and the mother's heart sank . . . sank. Slowly she turned the pale face towards herself, and as she saw the eyes quail before her glance, she knew there was no need to put the question,

'You are a brave little thing, Nina,' she said, taking the icy hands in hers; 'but you need not put a strain upon yourself any longer. Sit down, dear, and tell me all about it. You need not be afraid for me. We will bear it together.'

Nina sank down, sobbing, on the floor, and laid her head against Magdalen's knee. Magdalen bent down and kissed her without speaking.

'It is hard you should have new troubles, my poor child,' she said, faintly, after a pause; and as she spoke she clasped her hands tightly together. 'I won't question you, darling, for we both know what we heard. But we won't give up hope yet. It may be that . . . it . . . was averted just in time. And in that case they will be here directly. We will wait patiently for ten minutes longer, and then . . . if they have not come . . . we must send to see . . . what has happened. Do not speak, dear; there is no need to answer. Only pray.'

Her bowed head sank upon her clasped hands, her lips just touching the girl's pale brow. Deep silence reigned in the room; no sound broke the solemn still-

ness; no sound of lamentation from within, no sound of an arrival from without. The ten minutes slowly ebbed away. Six o'clock came and passed; and still Magdalen and Nina remained motionless—their eyes closed, and their hands folded.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FOOTSTEPS ON THE DEAD LEAVES.

MERVYN bounded along by his step-father's side after leaving Glen-Mervyn full of spirits. His good resolutions had strengthened, and his conscience was at rest.

He chatted on, on all sorts of subjects, till they came to the spot where their roads diverged.

'Could I not meet you somewhere on the way back this afternoon,' he said, turning his bright face up to his companion, 'so that we might walk home together?'

Lord Wardlaw put his arm affectionately round the boy as he answered, 'Certainly, my dear fellow! Let me see. What shall we make our trysting-place? Suppose we say the old gate? I shall have a good way to come after I leave off shooting, so I don't suppose I shall be there till a quarter past five. You will arrive first; but if you don't mind waiting, I shall be very glad of your company.'

So saying, Lord Wardlaw wished him good-bye, and, whistling to the dogs, strode off.

Mervyn watched him as he went along, rather thoughtfully, and with a heightened colour.

'How very unfortunate,' he said to himself; 'I wish I had remembered to tell mother last night!'

He half thought of running after him, and making his confession, but was deterred by the thought of the keeper.

'Well I must take care to be at the gate in good time,' he said after awhile, 'so as to tell him all about it before he finds it out for himself. That would indeed spoil it all.'

He turned round at last; and full of hope and spirits, ran off to the Vicarage, singing as he went. His last resolution was that he *would* call Lord Wardlaw 'father' on the very next opportunity, and he wondered vaguely when that opportunity would be. He did not hurry away from the Vicarage at five. His step-father had said he should not be at the gate till a quarter past; and though he was anxious to arrive there first, he did not wish to be too soon, and to have to wait about in the dark.

He stayed chatting to the vicar for some time, till Mr. Hughes remarked it was a dark evening, and he thought he had better start.

'I could find my way home blindfold,' laughed Mervyn, 'so it does not make much difference to me.'

However, he jumped up, and on glancing at the clock was surprised to find that it was very nearly time for Lord Wardlaw to be at the trysting-place.

'If I run all the way, I shall just catch him,' he said, as he wished the vicar good-night.

He was surprised, when he got out of the Vicarage,

to find how very dark it was. There were no stars, and he could only just see his way. It was, as he had said, no difficulty to him, knowing, as he did, every step of the way; but he began to think Lord Wardlaw might be a little puzzled.

'He will never find the gate,' he said to himself; 'it is a good thing I am here to show him where it is.'

He stopped for a minute to hear if there was any sound of his approach. He fancied he heard something in the distance, but was not quite sure. So he ran on till he was within (as far as he could judge in the darkness) a quarter of a mile of the gate. And then he stopped and listened again. This time there was no mistake. He heard Lord Wardlaw coming along plainly, in a cross direction ahead of him, making straight for the gate. He could distinguish his firm quick footsteps, trampling over the dead leaves; and the very words of the song he was singing as he went along:

> I had a message to send her,
> To her who my soul loved best.

Mervyn wanted very much to attract his attention, and to get him to wait till he came up to him, but his habit of not calling him by any name made it rather awkward. A false feeling of shyness prevented his calling out 'Father!' as his heart dictated.

'Another time I will,' he said to himself; 'I can't do it now.' While he hesitated Lord Wardlaw was getting farther and farther away.

'Stop!' Mervyn called out. 'Halloa! stop a minute!'

It might have been the loud tones of his own song that prevented Lord Wardlaw hearing; or, if the sound *did* reach his ears, he must have thought it was some boy passing by and calling to another, for he did not pause or answer; and Mervyn only heard the receding footsteps, and the song getting fainter in the distance—

> But I had my task to finish,
> And she had gone home to rest.

'He must be nearly at the gate now,' thought Mervyn. 'I shall never get up to him. Hardly had the thought passed through his mind when it was succeeded by another, which made him stop short and exclaim, 'Good gracious!'

Quick as lightning came the thought that Lord Wardlaw in the darkness would not perceive the change on the gate, and, expecting a step where there was none, would most likely lose his footing in vaulting over it, and get a very disagreeable fall. To make it worse, he had his gun with him, and it would be loaded, for he never fired it off till the last moment. Seized with a sudden dread, Mervyn set off running with all his might, hoping that he might just get within hearing in time, and warn his step-father of the danger which threatened him.

He tore along at the top of his speed, shouting as he ran, breathless and panic-striken. He could hear the loud tones of the manly voice above his own footsteps, and above his own quick breathing, still singing the same song; and he thought he must be gaining upon him, for the song sounded clearer. But the gate must

be very near now, and Mervyn knew how quickly he would vault over it. And then . . . How *could* he stop him? What *could* he do to attract his attention? He must be gaining upon him now, for he could distinguish every word he was singing; every note of the music that was ringing through the wood—

> And I cried in my passionate longing
> Has the earth no angel friend,
> Who will carry my love the message
> That my heart desires to send.

The powerful voice drowned every sound, and Mervyn's faint cries were unheard. And now the gate must be close at hand. Breathless and despairing there burst from the boy's lips the wild piercing cry, 'Father! father!'

For one happy moment he fancied there was a pause, and he strained every nerve and tore along at lightning speed. But if the word did reach Lord Wardlaw's ears it was, unhappily, too unfamiliar for him to suppose it could apply to him, and Mervyn's pricking conscience told him it was so.

To his dismay, the song burst out afresh, and the firm footsteps on the crackling leaves increased in speed, as if nearing the end of their journey. Presently, voice and footsteps stopped. . . .

The darkness was broken by a sudden flash of light, and simultaneously with a crash and a heavy fall there rang out into the silence the sounds which, penetrating far and wide, reached even to the open window at Glen-Mervyn—the loud explosion of a gun, followed by an agonised cry in a boy's voice.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TRYST BY THE GATE.

He was lying, prone and silent, by the gate, under the shadow of the old Welsh hills. They were looking down upon him in the darkness with pity and mute despair. By the son of the man who wronged him, wronged once more!

This was what was awaiting Mervyn, when at length he succeeded in dragging his trembling limbs to the spot. Among the hills and the echoes—on the very spot endeared to the boy by a thousand recollections—lay the form of his step-father, brought low by his means. The old Welsh hills, his boon friends and companions, which have loved to echo his merry shouts and laughter, which have so often looked down upon him with pride and admiration, have echoed sadly his wild piercing cry, and, relapsing into silence, were looking down despairingly on the wreck and the ruin before them.

How the boy got there he never could afterwards tell; how he reached the gate, how he climbed over it, he never knew; how he knelt down, how he *dared*

kneel down by the motionless figure as it lay, he never could imagine, he never could bear to think.

Frozen with horror, stupefied with grief, he was for a time deprived of sense or motion. The silence, the darkness, the loneliness, the impossibility of doing anything, the horror of the whole thing, deprived him of the power to act, to think, to feel. Help he must have, human aid and succour, communion with some living thing, or he will go mad. But, in that wild secluded spot, how is it to be found? His fainting heart reminds him of a day gone by, when in sport he hid himself in that lonely place, and saw no passer by from morn to nightfall. It was horrible, horrible, to be alone in the darkness with the dead. If he could lift up his voice and call, if his frozen tongue could perform its office, even then, who would hear? Who would catch the sound of his cry, and bear it onwards towards his home? No one!

Stop! He has in that wild place friends who have carried his voice far and wide in happier moments. Weird, wild friends, so familiar as almost to seem human to him. The echoes! Will they not help him now? Will they not repeat his cry for help, so that some one shall be attracted by the sound? It may be that they will carry his appeal to the very doors of Glen-Mervyn. They have done so before. His mother has often said, 'I heard the echoes ringing and laughing, so I knew that my boy was near.'

Exerting himself to the utmost, he tries to give a call. In vain. The echoes are mute and silent, for

from his parched and trembling lips comes a sound so faint they cannot catch it. His voice dies away, and his heart sinks within him.

Darkness deeper, silence greater; and the boy's nerves are giving way. It is horrible, horrible, to be alone in the darkness with the dead. The moments drag heavily on—moments, or hours, or whatever they be. To him they seem whole days, nights—he has lost all count of time. Alone, quite alone, and no hope of human help!

Presently it seems to him so long since it all happened, so long since the time he started from Glen-Mervyn, his step-father in health by his side, the keeper and the dogs behind. That could not have been this morning. Oh no, a long time ago! His step-father has been lying there many days now, and he, for years—or all his life long, it be may be—has been sitting silent, alone in the darkness with the dead.

Why should Thought at that moment suddenly resume her sway? Hitherto he has been too dazed, too bewildered to collect his ideas; but now, all in a moment, from the darkness around him, Thought brings clear tableaux before him, and gaze upon them he must, whether he will or no. Three vivid tableaux—the past, the present, and the future.

Puts before him first the picture of his bright and happy home. Lifelike and distinct are the moving figures, just as he saw them last.

Shifts the tableau, and shows him clearly that its brightness and its joy are flown. Forces upon him the

sudden conviction that, through his passionate act of selfish rebellion, he has wrecked his mother's new-found happiness, and blasted the peace of her home.

Shifts it again, and holds before him the darkest scene of all. His mother's love turned to hatred, his mother's face averted from him with looks of loathing, as the instrument and the cause of it all.

Drops the curtain, and leaves him shrinking, alone in the darkness, with the dead.

He *feels* at last what he has done; and his one frantic wish is to get away, away from it all, to hide himself somewhere, where no one will ever see or hear of him again. For he can never go home any more; never face her with the news; never see her look of grief first, of horror and of loathing afterwards. He must go at once. Why has he stayed so long? He must find his way to the station, and catch the night-mail from Holyhead on its way to London. He staggered to his feet, and tried to remember which way he ought to take. But as the needle turns to the north, so did his longing eyes turn with an irresistible attraction towards his beloved home.

'Going,' he muttered, 'going far away; never to come back any more.'

All that he was leaving, all that he was losing, came rushing over his soul like a whirlwind, and a sob burst from his aching heart.

'Mother!' he cried, holding out his hands in the darkness, 'I shall never see you again! Oh, mother! good-bye! good-bye!'

But he *could* not leave her like this. He must find some way to tell her of how it had all come about; of all he had meant to do; of his contrition and his firm resolutions.

'I have a message to send her,' he said, sobbing, unconsciously using the words of the fatal song; 'and send it I must and will.'

But the echoes will not take it, cruel and unforgiving as they are! Help and succour have throughout been wanting; messengers, then, are far away.

Oh, what was the nearest human habitation? What was the last human voice that fell upon his ear? His puzzled brain refused to remember; his fainting heart told him it was days and days ago. This dark silence has gathered round him, this hideous silence has been here, since . . . . since . . . . since he heard loud notes of music ringing through the paths of the wood!

Linked were those notes to verses; what did those verses say? . . . .

And there burst from his lips the words

> And I cried in my passionate longing,
> Has the earth no angel-friend
> Who will carry my love the message
> That my heart desires to send.
> . . . . . .

Those words have expressed his longing, and shown him at last a way.

There is still no chance of human succour, there is still no hope of human aid; but childlike thougths of

angel-spirits are floating round him now! Songs that his mother had sung him, hymns he has learnt to say. *An angel* will whisper his message. His mother will hear it some day! . . . .

Very quietly he knelt down by his step-father's side.

'Father!' he said softly, '*you* are my angel-friend. I have a message to send her, and no one can give it but you. I meant to tell you what I had done. I tried all I could to overtake you. Oh, why did you go so quickly? You will tell her all this in her dreams, and you will forgive me, I know. And tell her too, that I loved you, and called you "father" at last.' . . . .

Suddenly the boy paused, and starting, listened intently. A vague feeling of electric hope thrilled through his heart, and he bent over the figure again. There was a slight rustle of the dead leaves, and a deep-drawn sigh. Bending closer and closer, he heard the sigh repeated, and a faint voice say,

'Be comforted, my child; I am not much hurt!'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MESSAGE.

It was quite true. Lord Wardlaw, in falling, had sprained his ancle, and been stunned for a time, by falling with his head against the gate; but the contents of his gun had lodged themselves harmlessly in the ground, and he had not so much as been singed. Not sufficiently himself to be able to speak, he had yet been aware of the boy's presence, and had gathered in the sense of what he had said.

We need not paint the boys rapture, or his quick transition from the very depths of misery to an overwhelming joy. Those who have followed Mervyn's history thus far will know that his nature was capable of such sudden changes.

Full and free forgiveness was bestowed upon him by his step-father, who at once declared he should never give the subject a thought again.

'I consider you my preserver,' he said, laughing, 'for what should I do now if you had not pursued me so perseveringly. I should be in a nice plight alone here, in the dark, with no means of getting assistance. I think I shall have to send you home to order some conveyance

from the stables, for I don't believe I can walk. Lend me a hand, Mervyn, and let me see.'

The result of the experiment was, that he could not stand with any comfort; and they held a long conversation as to what had better be done. It was settled that Mervyn should run to the stables, and give orders; and then go on, and tell his mother what had happened.

'I am afraid she will be anxious about us,' said Lord Wardlaw, 'as we are so far behind our time; so it will be better for you not to return here, but to go on at once to the house.'

'I don't like leaving you alone,' said Mervyn wistfully.

'Never fear, my dear boy. I shall do very well.'

'I'll rush all the way,' eagerly exclaimed Mervyn, 'so that you shan't have to wait here long; and then I'll go strait into the drawing-room and tell mother all. . . .'

'I have a message to send her,' interrupted Lord Wardlaw—and dark as it was, Mervyn blushed crimson —'and you must give it word for word. Will you promise to do so?'

'I will do anything you tell me,' said the boy, and the tears rushed to his eyes. 'I will say anything, do anything in the world, to please you.'

'Very well,' said his step-father—and his voice showed how touched he was—'then say only this. Do not add one word to my message, nor take one word away. Say that I have sprained my foot getting over the gate in the dark, and that I have sent you on to say shall be home as soon as a conveyance can be got ready.

'Only that?' said Mervyn wistfully; 'nothing about how wrongly I behaved, and how sorry I am?'

'Not a word,' said Lord Wardlaw firmly; 'and above all, nothing about the gun.'

He particularly wanted to prevent the boy rushing in to his mother in his present state of excitement, and pouring out his confessions. He knew what a confused account he would give of what had happened; how long it would take Magdalen and Nina to unravel the truth from the vague recital; and how much time they would have to take alarm in the meantime.

Mervyn said nothing more, but ran off to do his step-father's bidding.

Consternation reigned in the stables at his news, and willing hands made hasty preparations to go to Lord Wardlaw's assistance.

Then the boy sped on. His heart was very full as he entered the halls he had so short a time ago thought he should never enter more, and sought the beloved presence he had thought he should never seek again. Remembering his step-father's injunctions, he checked his bounding step in the passage, and quietly opened the drawing-room door.

He had meant to speak softly, he had meant to walk in leisurely; but when he saw her start from her seat by the fire, and come to meet him with outstretched hands and a face on which yearning love and delight were vividly painted, he forgot everything but the joy of meeting her with no load on his heart no heavy tidings to unfold, and sprang to her embrace in a manner

and with an eagerness which at once confirmed her impression that he had indeed been snatched from the jaws of death, and caused her unquestioningly to clasp him in her arms, murmuring, 'Thank God! thank God!'

Yet the boy wondered a little to see her so moved; he wondered a little to feel her tremble; and when at last she looked him all over, and said, 'Not hurt! not singed, even!' he wondered more.

He felt so undeserving of such love; he felt such a longing to confess his misdemeanour; that, half-fearing he should tell all before he knew what he was saying, he hastily delivered his message.

'Mother,' he said, 'he has sprained his ankle, getting over the gate in the dark, and has sent me on to say he is coming as soon as a conveyance can be got from the stables. And that is all I may tell you.'

Lady Wardlaw changed colour as he spoke, but she looked more puzzled than alarmed.

'Tell me all about it, my darling,' she said, sitting down and drawing him to her; 'do not hide anything from me. And Nina, come here too, and help me to understand.'

Passing her arm round the slight form of the still trembling girl, whose dark eyes never moved from Mervyn's face, devouring him as one just risen from the grave, Magdalen laid her disengaged hand on the boy's, and waited for him to begin.

Mervyn's face was a study. Never in his life had he been so puzzled and dumb-founded. To refuse to com-

ply with a request of his mother's was a thing altogether strange and impossible. On the other hand, to disobey his step-father was equally impossible. To break his promise—a promise made under such peculiar circumstances—was out of the question. He looked from his mother to Nina, and from Nina to his mother, with a scared face, and said nothing.

'Mervyn,' said Magdalen faintly, 'something has happened to Charlie.'

For all answer Mervyn repeated his message, word for word, adding, 'That is all, mother, really.'

'You are hiding something from me, child,' she said, in a sharp tone of pain. 'That is *not* all, I am sure. Why, your eyes are swollen with crying, and your face as pale as death! *What* has happened, Mervyn? I desire you to answer me!'

Poor Mervyn positively writhed under the words. Concealment was so foreign to his nature, disobedience to his mother, so utterly strange, that it was all he could do to restrain himself from speaking. But above these feelings rose his new-born love and loyalty to his step-father, and prevailed.

'I wish I could, mother,' he said mournfully; 'but I promised faithfully not.'

'This is dreadful!' exclaimed Magdalen. 'Mervyn, whatever promise you have made, I absolve you from it! Whatever commands have been laid upon you, I release you from them! You never disobeyed me before. Do not break my heart now!'

'Mother, mother!' cried the boy, in despair; 'don't,

please don't! If you only knew all, you would say I was right.'

'But *why* should I not know all,' she demanded, 'if, as you say, there *is* nothing?'

'Because I have promised,' said Mervyn.

'Tell me one thing,' she said, and her voice faltered; 'why did you shout and cry as if in grief or terror when the gun went off?'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed Mervyn, stepping back in his astonishment, 'how did you know anything about the gun? That is the very thing I was not to mention to you.'

Magdalen was dismayed at the effect of her words.

'There is some dreadful mystery here,' she said, rising and advancing to the bell; 'and if you will not unravel it, I must find others who will.'

She took the bell-rope in her hand, and was about to ring, when she was startled by a glad shout from Mervyn, and, looking round, saw her husband in the doorway.

. . . . . .

'Was my messenger unfaithful?' said Lord Wardlaw, rather sternly, as he took his wife in his arms.

'No, father, no!' said Mervyn, eagerly; 'indeed I was not. Ask Nina!'

'I must believe him, I suppose,' smiled Lord Wardlaw, as he met the pale girl's glowing eyes.

'He would not say a word,' said Nina, proudly. 'No, not even when Aunt Magdalen positively ordered him

to speak, and said she would release him from any and every command that had been laid upon him.'

'Well done!' said Lord Wardlaw; 'well done, my messenger; and well done, little champion!'

'But I may speak now,' said Mervyn, eagerly; 'I may tell them the whole story from the very beginning.'

'Every word,' replied his step-father, 'only help me to a chair first.'

Mervyn flew on the wings of love to execute his bidding, almost upsetting his mother in his eagerness to perform the office. She gave way, a little bewildered, but well pleased to see the boy's demeanour. She sat down on the sofa near, with her arm round Nina. The impetuous boy flung himself at her feet, and poured forth his tale.

They all listened with breathless interest, an interest that became quite painful when he painted in vivid language his hot pursuit through the woods, the terrible dénouement, and the harrowing details of his lonely vigil in the darkness. But when he went on to describe the three pictures that had risen around him, and the determination to which gazing on them had brought him, Magdalen held up her hand in mute entreaty, for it was more than she could bear. But Mervyn would not stop, would not spare himself or her, till he had made a full and free confession. And he went on to tell them all that he had felt, all that he had said, and all that he had done. But he had gone too far. When he got to the parting with his mother—when he repeated his words of passionate farewell, when he spoke

of the message he had tried to send her—he broke down altogether, and sank, sobbing, into her arms.

'I will tell you the rest, Magdalen,' said Lord Wardlaw. 'I will deliver the message that our boy desired to send.'

So he gave it. A message, as we know, so tender, so humble, so full of child-like love and confidence, that his own voice faltered as he repeated it; and Magdalen, clasping her boy closer to her, bowed her head, weeping over him, and whispered tender words of fervent blessing and forgiveness.

'So, after all, Mervyn,' said Lord Wardlaw, presently, 'a breech-loader has been, from first to last, our best friend.'

'No, father,' said Mervyn, eagerly: 'it is Nina who has been our best friend. *She* first made me see I was wrong. The praise is all due to her. She is the best, the most unselfish . . . .'

'Mervyn!' burst passionately from the girl's lips, 'please do not praise me. Uncle Charlie, if you only knew what I was before he came to Granton, you would see how much I owe to him, and how grateful I ought to be.'

She spoke in a tone of concentrated fervour, surprised out of her usual reserve; and her beautiful eyes glowed and deepened as she raised them beseechingly to Mervyn's face.

'Hush!' said Magdalen, very softly; 'hush, my darlings. Love one another and be grateful to one another,

if you will; but give the praise only to Him by whom you were thrown together.'

The book is ended, and the story is told. The characters have acted before us, and the curtain has fallen on them all. So we have done with them; and returning each to our own life, forget, or only slightly remember, the parts they have played.

Yet it may be, that in life's drama we are acting the same parts as they; it may be we are learning, in our paths, the lessons they learnt in theirs. Our circumstances may be different, and our surroundings very unlike, but the spirit underlying all is for ever the same.

Varying widely as we all do, we are at least alike in this: that we are daily, each of us, shedding abroad an influence for good or for evil. Each upon each, and all upon all. Some directly, some indirectly, some consciously, and some unconsciously! But each has his use, each his place and function, which none but himself can fill.

The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. The weak things of the world are sometimes chosen to confound the mighty; the feeble and insignificant have their place too, and may, for aught we know, be exerting an influence on the powerful and the mighty.

Strong and proud though we may be, some despised one may be working in us, or in others, that which we

are powerless to accomplish. Therefore, we can despise neither ourselves nor others, nor the positions which we fill; since one can supply what the other lacks, the parts making a perfect whole. In that vast whole each is but a unit, an atom; yet without it, it may be, the whole fabric would fall to pieces.

Looking upwards on a starlight evening, do we realise the units of the glittering sky? Standing by the sea, do we consider the atoms of the sand we tread? Yet every star in the heavens has its space to brighten; and every grain of sand on the sea-shore has it place to fill.

Alike in Life and Nature, all seems chaos and confusion. To us the sand seems ever vaguely shifting, the toy of every wave and every footfall. To us the stars seem loosely scattered, sown broadcast on the firmament; sand and stars alike, in a meaningless, purposeless way. Yet there reigns over all creation the law of purpose and of order.

So, to us, the infinite varieties of character in the world seem thrown together in inextricable chaos—a seething mass of conflicting ingredients, working out their own ends amid error and confusion. Yet all is pervaded by a Sovereign Purpose, which we in our blindness do not see. To us, all is in hopeless entanglement; to our disordered minds all things are out of course; to Him, all the parts, fitly joined together, are working up to the end He has ordained—to a perfect consummation. Silently He is ordering all things

to the same end; mysteriously guiding our many feet, by the many thousand paths, to the same goal, blending our countless notes to the same glorious harmony; making, by His Almighty power, 'all things work together for good.'

S. & H.

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